

*Songs of the Well-beloved - Book I*

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# *Get Away Jordan*



*a novel*

*Mahir ben Eitan*

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## Foreword

I once saw a painting by Anthony Sweat entitled “Jesus of Nazareth.” It depicts a curly haired, brown-skinned man. He has a long nose and dark eyes. His black beard is closely trimmed. He stands in front of a small stone quarry with a mason’s chisel over his left shoulder, and a cube of dressed stone hanging from a sling in his right hand. If it hadn’t been for the setting in which the painting was displayed or the plaque next to it, I would not have had a chance of identifying the painting’s subject.

After all, Jesus has long, smooth hair parted down the middle. His beard is longer, with an identifiable strong chin. His nose is like mine, as is his skin color. He doesn’t work, and if he did, he would use woodworking tools. Normally when we see Him, He sits on hillsides with fingers pressed into the sign of the Trinity. But is this the real Jesus, or just the one that has come down to us through our Western heritage?

This story is not about the Jesus we have inherited from centuries-long European tradition. This story is about Yeshueh, or Shueh for short. He did not live in Nazareth. He called it Natzrat. His father was not Joseph, as in Haydn, Kennedy, or Smith. His father’s name was Yousef, as in Al-Khatib, Al-Qaradawi, or Salama.

The word used to describe Yousef’s trade was τέκτονος (tektonos), a Greek word meaning craftsman. Even in the original Latin translation of the fourth century CE, the word used was *faber*, which also means craftsman. Not until John Wycliffe produced his English translation of the Bible in 1382 did “craftsman” become “carpenter.”

In the early first century CE in the region of Jesus’ hometown, several Roman cities were being built. Lumber was not abundant in this area, nor was it used in construction. A man who had skillful hands would most likely have pursued masonry, as employment opportunities abounded. A man who could pack up his tools in a rucksack and head off for several weeks or months could earn sufficient money not only to feed his family, but probably to invest for a rainy day.

The Jesus we have come to know from our inherited European tradition was not born of a virgin mother in Bethlehem. He was devised by ascetic bachelor lawyers in Hippo, Nazianzus, and Caesarea. These scholars tried to outdo each other with their ability to milk a word of every possible meaning; to string distant, ambiguous texts together in a dazzling, ephemeral cobweb; and to stamp their dogma as the one and only true, denouncing anyone whose voice was less loud or description less complex as diabolical. According to them, the Lord Jesus Christ was such a lofty being that he could not even bleed, but had to have a chimera do it for him.

Think of it: the Divinity they constructed could not stoop to any mortal need, much less ever do something as basic as to relieve himself. But does this make him more real? If one of our co-workers never took a bathroom break, we would wonder where he parked his flying saucer, not fall down to worship him.

“But it never says any such thing in the Bible,” I can hear you thinking. It also never mentions a single instance of rain during the life of Jesus. A pregnant woman never crosses his path. Not a single dog barks at his disciples. Are we to infer from this that it never rained, that children were not born, that dogs had not been created yet? Such thoughts are absurd. And yet, we are so caught up in describing a Savior who is “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made,” that we forget to contemplate what such a divine being would do for the eighteen years separating his appearance at the temple until he was declared at Jordan. Did he sit around contemplating his navel, watching the clock tick, and keeping his divine mouth shut for some reason?

We also believe that Jesus is “true God and true man, in two natures, without confusion.” What of the man? What of the earthly nature?

I propose we discover the man named Yeshueh ben Yousef miBeit Yehudi min Natzrat; the man behind the God we call Jesus of Nazareth. Let’s strip away the blue eyes, long hair, and fair skin and envision him a man from the Middle East. Let’s not impose the celibacy of monks upon him but give him a wife every bit as noble and supportive as Eve or Mary. Let’s put some money in his purse, earned from hard and expert labor. Let’s

strip away the thought that, since he was God, he was the best at everything he did as a man. In so doing, we will not impose anything ungodly upon him. A man who gets seasick on moving waters is not sinful. A man who doubts things he does not yet know is not diabolical. And contrary to popular belief, a man who puns is not headed directly to hell.

To help you along the mental journey of making yourself think differently than you have your whole life, I have taken the language of this book a little out of your comfort zone. The place names are not given in their standard English rendition, but in their ancient, native equivalents. People's names are not Anglicized, but sound like what their mothers would have called them. And just like today, where James goes by Jim, they too go by their nicknames. Refer to the names list when you come across an unfamiliar one. In order to have a more authentic flavor, I have rendered some items the book in the local language. Hopefully you'll pick up the meaning from the context. The characters speak different languages and sometimes have difficulty communicating. Sometimes you will have to work a bit to understand them, as well. The historical setting of the Roman province of Palestina in the first century CE means regular people grew up with Greek mythology every bit as much as stories of the patriarchs and the prophets. When you are slowed by the unfamiliar names and foreign terms, when scripture is quoted out of its KJV context, just remember, this difficulty has its purpose. We are entering a different world. I'm not trying to invade your comfortable Holy Land with a foreign Jesus. I'm letting this long nosed, brown skinned, married mason live and breathe in a land undisturbed by Western tradition.

This is, however, historical fiction. Fiction is made up. Characters may have real names, but they are invented anew in my story. There have been those who have become so caught up in a well-crafted historical fiction book, that they would travel to the story's actual location and ask the tour guide where the fictional protagonist lived. Please don't show up in Bethany beyond Jordan wondering where Yochaved's tavern was.

However, this is *historical* fiction, not fantasy. Before being a novelist, I am an historian: diploma on the wall and everything. I have researched extensively to bring to life a story that is

accurate as possible. The stars and planets are where Stellarium says they would have been. The plants around the river were verified by a scholarly paper found on ResearchGate.net. I mapped distances and geographical features with Google Earth. And Gemini AI became my closest friend, answering hundreds of questions, most of which I verified by further research.

So, for a few hours, park your dogma at the curb, pull up a glass of wine diluted with local well water, munch some flatbread with fish sauce, and join Shueh and Miri in the Yordan (Jordan) River Valley as the sun sets on the last day of their former lives. When you finish, feel free to eat a ketchup doused burger, down a Diet Coke, and climb right back into your dogma. But perhaps your dogma's co-pilot might have trimmed his beard and gotten a tan. Who knows?

## List of Characters based on Historical people

- \*Aharon, Aaron, the brother of Moses
- \*Andreas ben Yona of Kfar Nahum, or Andrew the Apostle
- \*Antipus. Herod Antipus, Tetrarch of Galilee
- \*Avram, Abraham the Patriarch
- \*Chanokh, Enoch the Prophet
- \*Cleopas of Emmaus Nicopolis, Joseph's brother
- \*Elisheva of Yerushalayim, John the Baptist's Mother
- \*Eliyahu, Elijah the Prophet
- \*Gamaliel the Elder, Chief Justice of the Sanhedrin in the 1st Century CE
- \*Gavriel, the Angel Gabriel
- \*Horodos HaGadol, King Herod the Great
- \*Husha, Hosea the Prophet
- \*Melech Dawid, King David of Israel
- \*Miryam (Miri) bat Tzedek of Migdal Nunayya
- \*Miryam bat Yehoyakim of Zippori, Shueh's mother
- \*Moshe, Moses the Prophet
- \*Shimon bar Gamaliel, son and successor of Gamaliel
- \*Shimon bar Yona, Peter the Apostle
- \*Yehoyakim, The father of Mary, Shueh's grandfather, according to Christian tradition.
- \*Yeshayahu, Isaiah the Prophet
- \*Yeshua, Joshua the Prophet
- \*Yeshueh (Shueh) ben Yousef of Natzrat
- \*Yirmeyahu, Jeremiah the Prophet
- \*Yitzchak, Isaac the son of Abraham
- \*Yochanan (Yoni) ben Zekharyah of Jerusalem, or John the Baptist
- \*Yokov, Jacob the son of Isaac
- \*Yonah, Peter the Apostle's Father
- \*Yose ben Yochanan, Chief Justice of the Sanhedrin in 2nd Century BC
- \*Yousef ben Yakov of Natzrat, or Joseph, Mary's Husband
- \*Eyov, Job
- \*Zekharyah, John the Baptist's Father



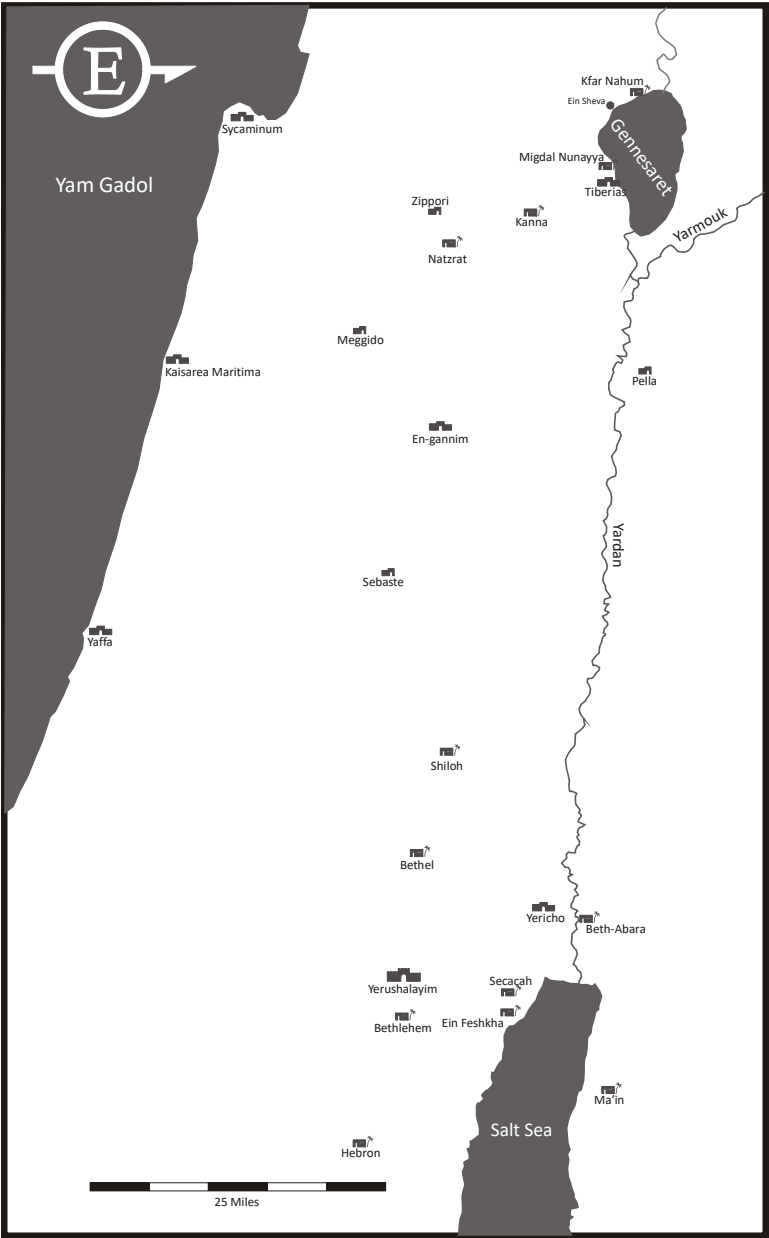
## List of Fictional Characters

- An unnamed widow from Yericho
- Aryan of Philadelphia, Yara's secret lover
- Avram (Ram), son of Chaim & Salome
- Basha of Sela, a robber
- Chaim of Beth-Nimrah, Salome's husband
- Reuben of Beth-Abara, assistant ferry operator
- Doris of Beit Hilel, A follower of Yoni, Jason's wife
- Eleazar, member of the Sanhedrin
- Eunike of Korazim, Shueh's friend, Timothy's wife
- Euphemia of Yericho, the rich girl's maidservant
- Ezra of Tekoa, A follower of Yoni
- Gershon, One of the Tannaim the Temple
- Hadas, Matan's wife
- Hilel of Yericho, A follower of Yoni
- Jason of Caesarea Philippi, A follower of Yoni
- Karon, ferry operator in Beth-Abara
- Kobie of Natzrat, childhood friend of Shueh
- Malkiel, One of the Tannaim the Temple
- Matan, a date farmer and the magistrate of Beth-Abara
- Rivka, The teenage girl from Yericho
- Salome of Beth-Abara, Chaim's wife
- Sara of Horvat Kur, A follower of Yoni, Andreas' wife
- Semil, A former slave from Cush (Somalia)
- Sempronius, The architect of the city of Tiberias
- Shar of Philadelphia, a robber
- Shatach of Tiberias, matchmaker
- Shem-achad of Meron, Shem #1, a follower of Yoni
- Shem-du of Kfar Vradim, Shem #2, a follower of Yoni
- Timotheus (Timo) of Kfar Nahum, Eunike's husband
- Tzakhi of Natzrat, a childhood friend of Shueh
- Tzedek of Yerushalayim, A follower of Yoni
- Uzi of Beth-Abara, hemp farmer and medicine man
- Yara of Philadelphia, wife of Shar
- Yishach ben Mattani, A wealthy merchant from Yericho
- Zevulun, Rivka's father

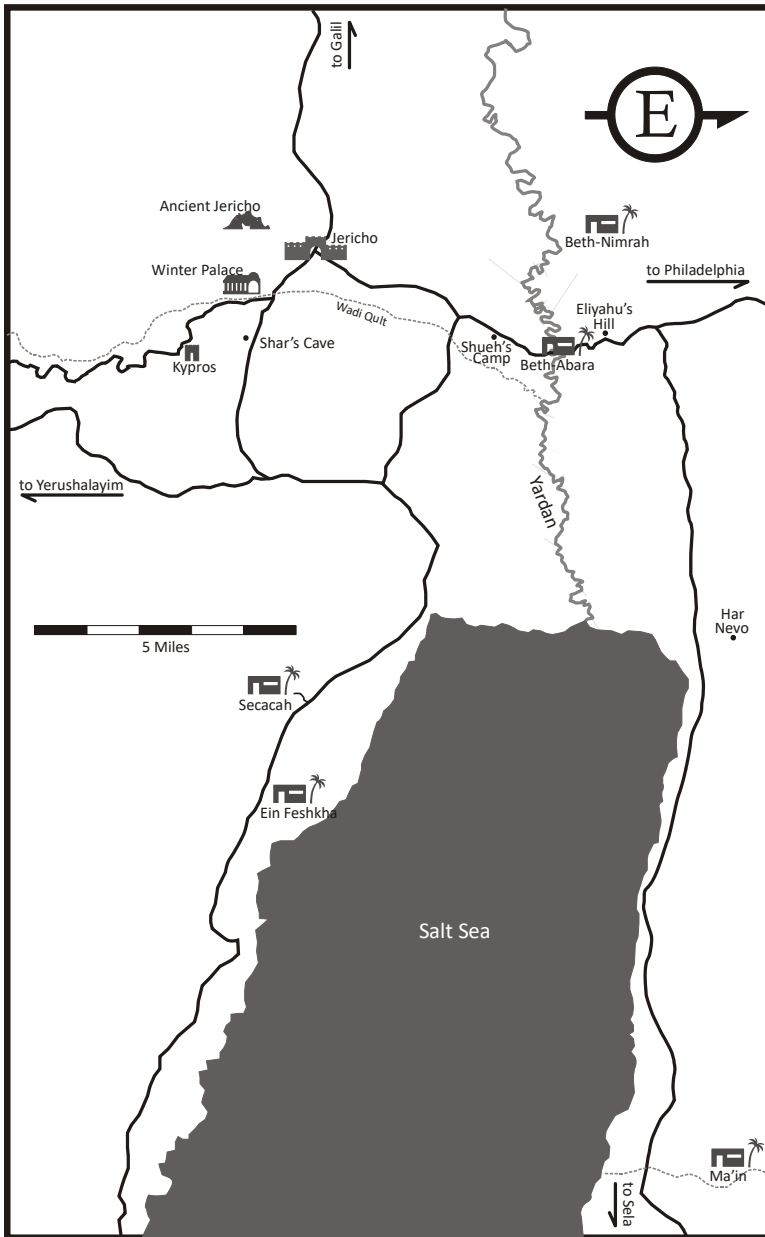
## List of Place Names

- Ammon = Amman, Jordan
- Atona = Athens, Greece
- Beth-Abara = Qasr el Yahud, Israel / Al-Maghtas, Jordan
- Brechat HaShiloah = Pool of Siloam
- Britannia = England
- Caledonia = Scotland
- Cush = Ethiopia
- Galil = Galilee
- Gennesaret = Sea of Galilee
- Har Nevo = Mount Nebo
- Ilion = Troy from Homer's Iliad
- Indike = India
- Kaisarea = Caesarea, Israel
- Karthago = Carthage, Tunisia
- Katane = Catania, Sicily
- Kfar Nahum = Capernaum, Israel
- Korazim = Chorazim
- Lusitania = Portugal
- Meron = Mount Meron, near Bar Yohai, Israel
- Migdal Nunayya = Northern suburb of Tiberias, Israel
- Mitzrayim = Egypt
- Mount Senir = Mount Hermon
- Natzrat = Nazareth, Israel
- Panion = Caesarea Philippi, near Snir, Israel
- Pella = Tabqet Fahel, Jordan
- Philadelphia = Amman, Jordan
- Pillars of Heracles = Rock of Gibraltar & Jebel Musa, Morocco, or the Strait of Gibraltar
- Sela = Petra, Jordan
- Tiberias = Tiberias, Israel
- Yarden = River Jordan
- Yehudi = Judea, Israel
- Yericho = Jericho, Israel
- Yerushalayim = Jerusalem, Israel
- Zippori = Sepphoris, Israel

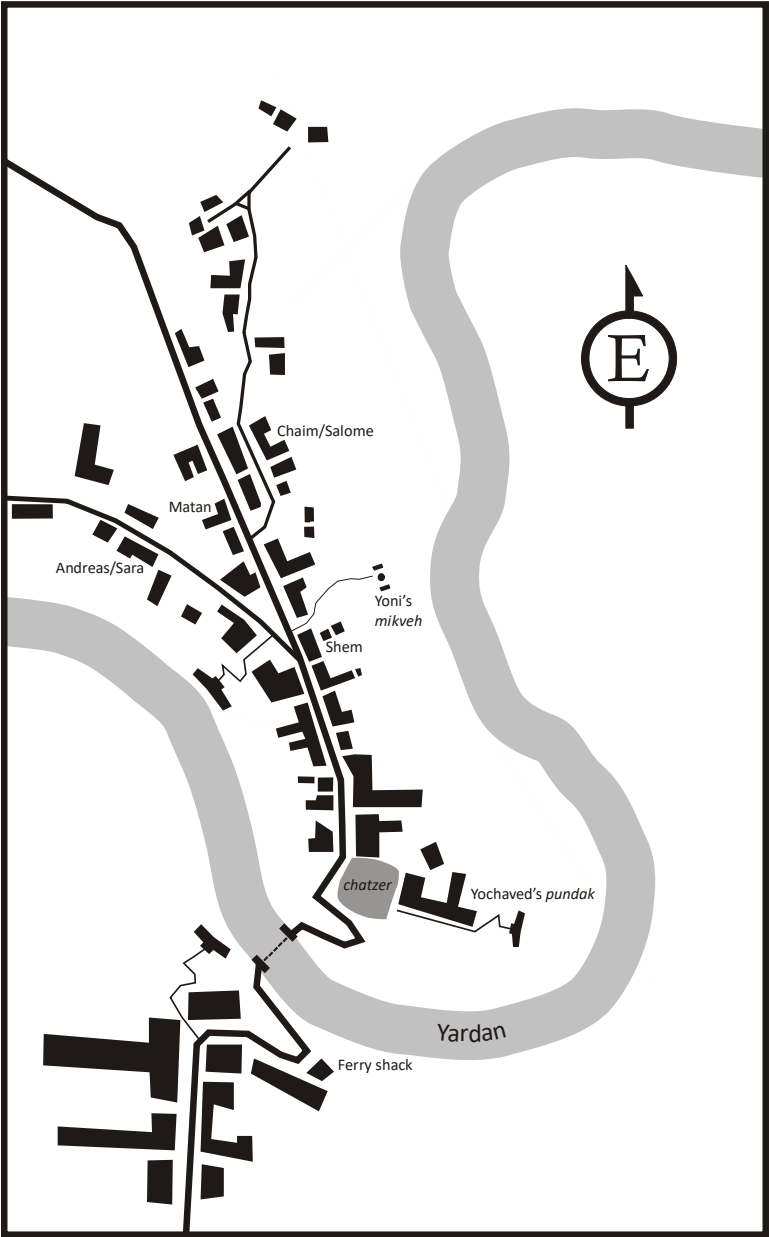
Eretz Yisrael



## Yordan River Valley



Beth-Abara



# Chapter 1

## Author's Notes

The main events of this book take place on the second and third days of the week, 22-23 Nisan in the year 3789, which correspond to Tuesday and Wednesday, 26-27 April 29 CE. The first day of *Pasha* (Passover) had taken place the previous Monday. The festival lasted for seven days, meaning Shueh's and Miri's journey could not have begun until early on Tuesday morning. The setting is the road that leads southeast from Jericho to the River Jordan, the traditional site of Jesus' baptism.

At this time this road would have been a major mercantile route, carrying daily traffic between the major cities of Philadelphia (Amman) to the east, Sela (Petra) to the south, and Yericho (Jericho). Where there is a highway, there are highwaymen. The line of cliffs that rise from the Jordan River Valley to the south of Jericho are pocked with caves where such robbers could have made their camps. Their activities would have taken place close to those caves.

We know from Biblical history that fording the Jordan here is difficult. When Joshua brought the hosts of Israel over Jordan, the waters had to be stopped miraculously. Also, when Elijah and Elisha crossed here, Elijah's cloak was needed to miraculously stop the waters. Were this crossing to be used daily for commercial traffic, another means for crossing must have been provided. Since no traces of a stone bridge have been discovered here, I have opted to establish a ferry at the crossing. A ferry is a natural choke point for traffic. Hence enterprising people would naturally have built inns and taverns to facilitate the traveler's journey. Add to that the ferryman's home, a forge for mechanical repairs, a tannery for renewing saddles and straps, and all the other homes and necessities, and soon a village straddles both sides of the river. I have chosen, following the lead of Origen of Alexandria (a Biblical scholar of the third century CE), to call the village on the east bank of the river *Beth-Abara*, which means house of crossing.

The travelers in our story, Miri and Shueh, having set out late from Jericho, set up camp just to the west of the perimeter fence of what is now marked as Caesar El Yehud on Google maps. It is a fifteen-minute walk from there to the river crossing.

The characters in this chapter include the following. Characters with an asterisk are based on historical people.

- \*Andreas ben Yona of Kfar Nahum, or Andrew the Apostle
- \*Miryam (Miri) bat Tzedek of Migdal Nunayya
- \*Yeshueh (Shueh) ben Yusef of Natzrat
- \*Yochanan (Yoni) ben Zekharyah of Jerusalem, or John the Baptist
- Euphemia, Fausta's maidservant
- Fausta, a Roman girl living in Yericho
- Karon, ferry operator in Beth-Abara
- Sharjeel (Shar) of Philadelphia, a robber
- Talya, daughter of Andreas and Sara
- Yiska, daughter of Yoni and Aviva

Place names in this chapter include the following with their corresponding modern names.

- Beth-Abara = Qasr el Yahud, Israel / Al-Maghtas, Jordan
- Beth-Nimrah = Wadi Shueib, Jordan
- Kfar Nahum = Capernaum, Israel
- Philadelphia = Amman, Jordan
- Yordan = River Jordan
- Yehudi = Judea, Israel
- Yericho = Jericho, Israel

## A Place for You to Pitch Your Tents Deut 1:33

Shueh looked all about him as the last watch of the day was approaching. The sun hastened its journey to the horizon. The hills began to lose their drab mantle of brown and gray, instead donning hues of teal and dark blue. Directly overhead, the sky was still cobalt, but in the East, it was more the color of hyacinth, melding with the mountains of Ammon. Circling him and stretching into the indistinct shimmer of the foothills in all directions ran the flat expanse of the mottled tan desert, broken only by small stands of salt grass and clumps of sage, with an occasional tamarisk. To the northwest small clouds of dust indicated several small groups of people and animals hurrying toward the confines of Yericho.

Beside him, Miri's breaths puffed audibly through her nostrils as she breathed. Each of their footsteps kicked up a spray of at least half a dozen otherwise invisible locusts who clicked their way to a new hiding place. Besides the crunch of their own footsteps, the flapping of their head coverings in the evening breeze, the fluttering of the locusts, and the shrill piping of the birds, an overpowering silence radiated down from the cloudless dome of the heavens. His eyes now fixed on the only real green in this entire landscape, a line of willow, palm, and tamarisk that wound their way along the banks of the river about two thousand paces distant. This was the destination they had been pursuing for many days. Now it was finally within reach.

Miri flashed a radiant grin over her shoulder as she quickened her pace ahead of Shueh. He smiled at her enthusiasm, but it only came from his mouth. Although he too was excited to end the journey, an awful weight pulled at his heart and a pit of doubt gnawed at his belly. He took a few quick steps to catch her hand and then pulled her to an abrupt stop.

"What?" she called out. "We have to hurry before the sun sets."

He was silent, but stood his ground firmly. He began to chew at his beard with his top teeth as he stared at the line of trees for a few moments. Then, as she gazed questioningly up at his eyes, he screwed them shut as he covered his forehead with his free hand.



“We're almost there, my love. How long will you take away our lives?” She begged. He slowly massaged his brow, let his head droop and followed as she helped him maneuver to a small outcrop of rock to the right of the road and sit down, waiting patiently for him to speak. She squatted at his side, pulled aside his *kafiyah* and combed his damp hair with her fingers. He uncovered his eyes and let his head fall back under her soothing hand as his mouth and eyes relaxed.

“Don't worry,” he finally breathed. “We will not turn back again, but I just cannot bring myself there this evening.”

“So, another night under the stars, I assume?” She fell back on her heels and squinched half her face in a hopeless expression. “It gets cold out here at night, you know. Really cold.”

He cupped her chin. “Yes, I know. But you will be warm enough.” With that, he stood, let his bag down from his shoulder, and set off to gather bits of brush and wood for a fire. “Look,” he called from twenty or thirty paces away, “I found some goat pellets, a whole pile of them!”

“Oh no you don't. Not on *my* fire,” she called back. “That stuff would stink all night long.”

“But it burns so easily,” he pleaded. “No *ez* scat for my *ezer*?”

Miri groaned at his pun. “No, we're not having either scat or your jokes. Look behind you in the *wadi*,” she pointed at the gully that wound down from the Yericho hills and stretched to where it joined the river. “There's got to be enough scrub there to make a decent fire.”

“You speak, I go forth into the desert,” he called back as he kicked at the goat pellets and headed off to the *wadi*. He purposefully chose the version of the word *speak* that sounded almost exactly like the word *desert*.

Miri groaned again. “No more puns,” she pleaded half-heartedly. He looked back to see her shading her eyes against the setting sun, surveying the ground and looking for a suitable spot to camp for the night. He trusted her to pick the right spot, something that offered a little seclusion from anyone on the road.

## In Beth-Abara, Beyond Jordan John 1:28

“I don't think he is coming,” Andreas sighed as he dropped his hand from shielding his eyes against the setting sun. A quick glance at Yoni, who was beginning to glare at him, made him hastily add “today, at least.”

Andreas saw Yoni grimace, shake his head slightly at him, and then turned his gaze back out over the desolate valley that separated Beth-Abara from Yericho. Andreas looked with him along the road that snaked across the valley. Thin clouds of dust were kicked up by travelers tinted the sunset red where they rose above the Yehudi hills. Any hint of the travelers themselves was blurred by the dance of the *shedim*, what the ignorant believed were jinn and demons. The distant travelers were mostly from a large caravan from Philadelphia that had passed through town today, but it had been accompanied by the half dozen pilgrims who had come from Yericho this morning to hear Yoni.

Yocheved's hostel, on whose roof they stood and within which Yoni's family had semi-permanent lodging, had been hard pressed to feed the crowd of merchants who demanded food while waiting on the ferry. Yoni's little Yiska had been a flurry of sandals and braids as she ran back and forth to fetch drinks for the crowd. The room had been a confusing earful of strange accents, odd words, and unintelligible babble, but as Karon and his sons had finally gotten them all to the other side of the river, it had quieted back down to some calling children, a few barking dogs, and the clatter of Yochaved cleaning the mess in the hostel. Andreas watched the distant dust clouds evaporate into a completely empty sky. Looking back to the valley floor, squinting as hard as he might, there was no movement to be discerned anywhere on the road.

“No,” he heard Yoni grumble, shaking his head and pursing his lips, which caused his chin beard to thrust forward like a sparrow's wing, “not today.”

Andreas, whose eyesight was still sharp, could see for himself that there was no traffic on the road headed his way. And it didn't take good eyesight to be able to discern that Yoni was bitterly disappointed. Yoni was about as tall as the *pithos* that Yochaved stored her grain in, and roughly the same shape. But

within that girth was a mighty man. He could still throw even Yiska high in the air. But this evening, beneath his rough woolen robe, stained and worn from continual use, his great shoulders slumped. The fingers of his right hand picked at the knuckles of the other, which Yoni did whenever he was lost in thought. When he spoke, those hands were always part of the message. But no matter in thought or in speech, his hands could never be still. Except when he slept. Andreas had seen him many times as when he rose to care for his own little Talya. Yoni slept with his hands, palm to palm, tucked under his cheek, hidden beneath the unruly mass of his beard. He could have looked angelic in that pose, were it not for his ample lips vibrating in a snore that had probably been what woke Talya to begin with. And since he was chewing his beard, he probably would be lost in thought for a long time to come, even though down below dinner would soon be served. Andreas withdrew toward the ladder that led up to the roof upon which they were standing, but saw that Yoni did not take the hint, so he stepped back to his place beside him. He should not precede his master. "Do you think he is close?" he asked quietly.

The sparrow's wing fell back to join the rest of Yoni's splendidly ragged beard while his mustache took its turn standing out as he pushed his upper lip into his nostrils with his pursed, lower lip. Andreas waited for his reply as he shooed a fly that had lost its way from the caravan.

Around them the town began to settle down for dinner and bed. The fruit seller was moving his bins off their stands by the street and into his warehouse. Two older men were finishing up another of their ongoing arguments, probably about whose dog had chased off the goats this time. A knot of girls, his own Talya among them, were headed up the path to the spring to fetch fresh water for the next morning. Old Karon and his youngest, were hauling the ferry back to the east side to tie it up for the night. And above it all hung the smokey fragrance of meat being roasted over a mesquite fire, one of Andreas' favorite smells. His mouth watered at the thought of a bit of piping hot mutton wrapped in fresh bread with some sharp red onions.

He was startled back to the present when he saw Yoni heading for the ladder. “Yes, he is close,” Yoni said as he swung his leg over the top rung. “Close, but still far away.”

## Who Gave Jacob for a Spoil, and Israel to the Robbers? Isaiah 42:24

Shar sat on a mound of dirt by the side of the road, his head down, his face hidden behind his *kafiyah*. He was massaging his ankle and moaning quietly as he eyed the crowd of people passing him by through the fringe of his head covering. A few of them glanced in his direction, but most kept their eyes straight ahead. If he was going to get one of them to stop, and the right one at that, he had to keep his glance averted and keep moaning until the right person came along. Finally, about twelve people down the road, he spotted the right one. She was young and slim, but well-dressed and lively. He waited until a few more people had passed, then cocked his head up and put on a hopeful grimace, mixed with welcome and just a little pain. As she neared, he gazed into her eyes for the briefest of moments and then turned his gaze to the person ahead of her. He let out the tiniest moan and visibly massaged his ankle again.

It worked! She paused for just a moment, at which he caught her gaze again, and with uplifted eyebrows wordlessly sought her assistance. If she would just hold his gaze for another second, he would have her. He knew he was a handsome man, and he knew how to present himself for maximum attention. He cut his forelocks, so they hung down just past his brows, giving his every glance a private, secretive look. His eyes were a lighter shade of brown than everyone else's, so they too attracted a bit of attention. Unlike most other men in the region who took overt pride in how bushy and unkempt their beards grew, he kept his trimmed to just a knuckle's breadth. Both hair and beard were always freshly anointed with just the right amount of oil to impart a sheen of health and a bit of wealth. While his clothing was simple, he did his best to beat out the dust every morning, to crimp his cuffs with some spittle and a knife edge, and to mend any worn or frayed spots.

"Are you hurt, my father?" the girl piped in a friendly but concerned voice. Both she and her older, more dowdy traveling companion stepped out of the flow of the crowd to look down on him.

Ah, this was definitely the right one. She carried the manners of a rich *romim*, and her companion is probably her servant. “I am well enough, my child,” he answered in matching courtesy. “I saw a face almost as beautiful as yours. Then I stepped on a rock. My ankle. It will be fine.”

“Oh, I am so sorry,” the young woman cooed, hiding a light flush of embarrassment behind her hand. “How bad is it? Can we have a look?” The young woman, not waiting for a reply, knelt and gently took his calf between her hands.

“Thank you, but I am...” he stuttered in mock pleasure.

“Yes, I know, you’re well enough,” she tutted and then looked up at her companion. “Euphemia, what do you think?”

“I think you ought to be careful, Lady Fausta” Euphemia responded irritably, raising her eyebrows and looking at her sidelong as her head made a quick motion along their direction of travel.

“Don’t be that way,” Fausta responded. “This poor man is obviously not a concern. Look at him!”

While Euphemia rolled her eyes again, Shar placed his right hand on her hand cradling his ankle. “She is right,” he admitted. “There are wily robbers on the road. They take advantage of you.” As he said this, he was glancing past the folds of her robe into her breast, where he spotted a silver pendant as big as his thumb hanging from a fine chain. He raised his left hand to cup Fausta’s cheek. As she raised her eyes to look into his, his right hand quickly darted from his ankle into her breast to grasp the pendant.

“Ow!” he suddenly exclaimed in pretended pain. As he groaned, his left hand tensed at her chin, pinching ever so slightly, while his right hand jerked as swiftly as possible back to his ankle with the pendant hidden in its palm. “No, it will be some time before I can walk.” He said as he brought the fingertips of both hands together, letting the pendant fall deep into his own sleeve. “But pray, do you have a crust of bread, maybe some wine? To help me for another hour while my ankle gets better?”

Euphemia grudgingly dug in her bag for one of the remaining flatbreads there, shoved it in his direction, and then slung the wineskin out for him. He graciously accepted the

bread, then courteously wiped his lips with the corner of his cuff before accepting a long swig from the skin. "May the gods bless you," he bowed, winking at the young woman, and then returning to nurse his ankle.

While the rest of the crowd passed, he nibbled at the bread, keeping his head down so as not to be noticed by anyone else. After the last straggler had passed, he wolfed down the remaining bread and let the pendant fall out of his sleeve into his upturned hand. It had been a good day. He stood, stretching his limbs and gasping a deep breath of air, and then walked across the road towards the cliffs. Not only did he not limp, but there was an extra spring in his step.

## Chapter 2

### Author's Notes

There were three festivals at which “all your males shall appear before the Lord,” The Feast of Unleavened Bread (*Pasha*), The Feast of Weeks (*Shavuot*), and the Feast of Tabernacles (*Sukkot*). Due to many mitigating factors such as distance, time, money, and the limited space in Jerusalem, not every male went to every feast every year. It was more common for working-class families to only go up on special occasions, such as a child's *bar/bat mitzvah*. Shueh's trip in this chapter is at his younger brother's *bar mitzvah*. Three of Jesus' brothers are named in scripture: Yakov (Jacob), Shimon (Simon), and Yehuda (Judas). I have added another sister, Marta.

While those not familiar with the geography of the Holy Land may think the “road down to Jericho” runs directly from Jerusalem to Jericho, it actually has to follow the contours of hills and canyons and enters the Jordan Valley some five miles south of the city proper. Traffic along this road included not only individuals journeying from Trans Jordan to Jerusalem for annual festivals, but daily commercial traffic between Jericho and Jerusalem, and many points eastward. A line of limestone cliffs pocketed with holes and caves looms over the west of this five-mile road. For travelers and businessmen, being outside the city walls after dark was an invitation to the highwaymen, or *gannab*, who inhabited these caves.

Although the Jews had their own ancient culture, they had absorbed Greek (or *Goyim*) culture for the previous three centuries after Alexander the Great had conquered the Middle East. They probably knew Greek mythology better than we do. And because of the current Roman (*Romim*) occupation, the same was true of the culture and traditions of Rome.

Characters introduced in this chapter include the following. Characters with an asterisk are based on historical people.

- Aviva of Beth-Hakerem, Yoni's wife



- Avram (Ram), son of Yoni and Aviva
- Basha of Sela, a robber
- Chaim of Beth-Nimrah, A follower of Yoni, Salome's husband
- Doris of Beit Hilel, A follower of Yoni, Jason's wife
- Ezra of Tekoa, A follower of Yoni
- Hilel of Yericho, A follower of Yoni
- Jason of Caesarea Philippi, A follower of Yoni
- Marta, younger sister of Jesus
- \*Miryam bat Yehoyakim of Zippori, Shueh's mother
- Noach, or Noah the prophet
- Salome of Beth-Abara, A follower of Yoni, Chaim's wife
- Sara of Horvat Kur, A follower of Yoni, Andreas' wife
- Shem-achad of Meron, Shem #1, a follower of Yoni
- Shem-du of Kfar Vradim, Shem #2, a follower of Yoni
- \*Shimon, younger brother of Jesus
- \*Yakov, younger brother of Jesus
- \*Yehuda, younger brother of Jesus
- Tzedek of Yerushalayim, A follower of Yoni

Place names in this chapter include the following with their corresponding modern names.

- Atona = Athens, Greece
- Sela = Petra, Jordan
- Yerushalayim = Jerusalem, Israel

## A Young Bullock Without Blemish Ezekiel 46:6

It was hard not to stare mesmerized at the coals alternating between glowing orange and ashy white as the evening breezes tried to decide which direction they would chase. There had been a puff or two of smoke as the kindling had licked at the tinder, but now it burned hot and clean. Not even the sharpest-eyed *gannab* would have made out their camp from their caves on the western cliffs.

Miri reheated some flatbread over the coals and spread a tangy paste of lentils and beans over the bread. “Just like *Ima* used to make,” Shueh smiled as he chewed. He was glad he could be eating leavened bread again. He always tired of eating *matzah* a few days before *Pasha* was over.

“Your *ima* would have had mutton and barley as well,” she retorted. “But I do have my *ima*’s secret ingredient.”

“Someday, I’m going to find out what that secret ingredient is,” he smiled.

Watching the glowing coals and missing the taste and chewiness of some mutton, his mind strayed to standing near the raging fires and billowing smoke of the altar at the temple, the second time their family had made the trek up to celebrate *Pascha* in Yerushalayim; it had been just two years ago that he had come for his own *bar mitzvah*. The smell was almost overpowering. The temple *kohanim* were better than his hometown priests at making sure none of the animal’s pelt got near the flames, so the smell of burning hair did not pollute the pleasant aroma of a little fat dripping into the fire alongside the browning and roasting mutton.

“Ima,” he had asked, “why is it just the blood, fat, and bowels that are burned? Does God not like the good meat like we do?” He had noted the racks of ribs and tenderloin roasting at the top of the altar and being picked at by the staff, the less prime cuts being given back to the person who brought the offering.

“Has Antigonous been filling your head with *Goy* stories again,” his mother smiled? “They believe the gods feast on the smoke from the offering, right?”

“But that is what most *Yehudim* think, too, Ima,” he quietly replied.

“Sadly, yes,” she sighed. “But contrary to what most people think, there are neither bears nor forests in our world.” She often used this phrase to devalue the traditions of her neighbors she thought were not necessarily true.

“You doubt the story of Elisha, the children, and the bears?” he asked her, remembering the saying of their *rav* that the children emerging from the forest had been miraculous enough, there being no forests or bears where Elisha had lived.

“I have reason enough to doubt some small parts of what has come down to us as Adonai’s words. Some of the sayings and stories have the accent of the voice of man. I know the word of Adonai,” she said with an intense gleam in her eye. “I have known that word in my bowels, my son. And one day, you too will come to know what the word of Adonai truly is.”

A long moment of silence passed between them, her with one hand on his shoulder and the other petting the hair on his head. Then Yehuda started squawking because of hunger. Miri adjusted the sling he was carried in to bring him to her breast, and then gathered Yakov, Marta, and Shimon close. She pointed them toward the altar and, in her teaching voice, explained to them about the sacrificial ordinance.

“When we celebrate *Pascha*, children, we don’t offer a weak, sick, or wounded animal. We bring the best we have; the strongest, the most beautiful. Only such an one is worthy of shouldering the weight of our burden of sin, the weakness of our cowardice, and the frailty of our sickness. See how the father cuts the throat of the beast, and the priest catches the blood in the cup? They pass it up the line to the priest at the altar, who pours out the blood over the horns. Then they slice the belly of the poor thing, pull off its skin and pull out its entrails. The skin is given to tanners. The fleece is made into clothing, while the skin becomes a wine sack or, if unblemished enough, into the roll for Adonai’s word. Its fat and entrails are put on the fire and burned to ash.”

“*Virah yehiva, et-ri’ach hanichoach...*” Shueh chanted as he remembered how God had smelled Noach’s offering of incense upon Ararat. “God does not consume the smoke as a meal, but it is to him a pleasant aroma,” he murmured. Something lined up behind his eyes, allowing him to see the symbolism a little

clearer. This had been happening much more to him since he had first come to Yerushalayim a few years back. "It is like the *ketoret* burned inside the temple, which is like our prayers. God is pleased when we talk to him, and perhaps more pleased when we give him something of our own." He noticed that Yakov was reaching out to tug at Marta's braids, so he quickly caught Yakov's hand in his and made him pet her head instead. "Then he can have mercy on us?"

Ima nodded approvingly. "And except in the *olah* where the beast is completely burnt, part of that mercy is that we get to eat some of the meat. What was best in the animal can become part of us, making us a little more like the sacrifice."

"Is it really the animal, its blood and meat, that atone for our sins?" he asked. "I mean, yes, it is something of a burden to sacrifice an animal, but seeing as how we get to eat it, is it enough for us just to kill a beast? How can that make up for the things we do?"

He looked down at Yakov, who he could tell was simply aching to pull his sister's braids. Shueh looked at him through lowered eyebrows in mock sternness. "Shouldn't we have to do something harder to pay for the things we do wrong?"

"No. That's bears and forest, my boy," she laughed. "Nothing we can ever do will make good what we have done bad." She then reached over to guide Marta away from Yakov. "That is what *Mashiach* will do. The sacrificial lamb is but a shadow of him. *Bi'at HaMashiach BeMeheira BeYameinu*. May he come soon."

While other people occasionally mentioned the coming of the Anointed One when they spoke of better times to come, Ima used the phrase much more often, and usually put it in some sort of context, not just as a wish. "When will *Mashiach* come?" he had asked then.

Her reply was somewhat shadowy itself, and although it was bright in his memory, he was not sure he yet understood it. "Too soon for me, but he will come to you at the right time."

He recalled the tear that had sprung from her eye and fallen on his tunic. As he remembered, he looked down and saw some bean mash on his robe. He glanced over at his wife with a sheepish gaze, who rolled her eyes and shook her head slightly, a

tiny smile twitching at the edge of her mouth. He seldom made it through mealtime without spilling something on himself.

They silently chewed the savory meal while watching the sun descend behind the western hills. The vault of heaven transformed into a perfect gradient stretching from orange-red in the west to midnight blue over the Yordan. He retrieved their wineskin from his bag, and they washed the meal down with a few swings of wine, leaving it half-empty.

She had to pick a few globs of paste from his beard and brush crumbs from his tunic before she would accept the grateful kiss he offered for a tasty meal. He added a few more twigs to the fire and banked the coals with his walking stick, while she smoothed out a spot to sleep and arranged the blankets. But he was not ready for sleep. He touched her lightly on her hip as he stood up and circled his finger a few times in the air. She shrugged and nodded, and went on with her preparations. He drummed his fingers at his side for a moment, deciding which way to go, and then set off back up the rise to the road.

## If He Steal to Satisfy His Soul Proverbs 6:30

Basha pulled himself up the rockslide to their cave at the base of the cliff. It had been a crappy and useless day. The herds of people that went out to Yardan each day used to be fairly easy pickings, but now that there were more *Romim* boots with each group, it made his job so much tougher. It wasn't like they were official or anything, there weren't any chief telling the boots what to do, but they were there anyway. Why these women-worshipping lunks were heading out in the desert to listen to some upstart holy man, Basha couldn't quite figure. If you're gonna pray to fussy goddesses and wimpy gods who hadda divide up the work between a dozen of 'em to get anything done, why you gonna go out and get dunked by some locust-eater who thinks a single god can handle everything himself? They and the *Goy-loving hoi oligoi* ought to go live with their smarty pants lovers in Atona, or wherever it is they came from. Real men didn't have to dress up in iron and march in lockstep with hundreds of their like to do real fighting. Give a man a sharp *khinjar* and a few brothers who had spilled blood before, that's who *Allah* gave his power to.

Reaching the shelf that led to his cave, Basha turned around and looked after the last straggling pilgrims of the day. Such ripe pickings there had been, but just outside his reach. His normal plan was to lie behind a pile of rocks or in a thicket while the leading part of the group would wander by. Then when a gap came, he would stand up and almost catch the last one, but not quite. Then he would slow down, fake a little bit of a limp so he had an excuse for falling behind, and then get caught up by the main body of the group. As folks would pass him, he'd keep a sharp eye out for things that he wanted: a thick and shiny neck chain, lots of rings on a single hand, or even a sack stuffed with good smelling leftovers. Once he made up his mind, he'd wait for just the right time. The crowd might jostle a little, or there might be a really good bunch of rocks to get behind, or the poor bumpkin might just fade outta the crowd. He could always tell just the right moment. Then he would grab what he wanted and then duck out and dash up the hill. He was pretty skinny and really fast, unlike those lumbering city folk. If they chased, they

never got near him. But when there was a *gladius* toting hunk of muscle tagging along with the herd, it meant that just the right time wasn't gonna be anytime soon. Those wart-faced gasbags didn't know how to fight, but some of 'em could run pretty fast.

Today there hadn't been any sparkly baubles he could find, but there had been that tailor with the bag of smoked goat and crispy bread he had had his eyes and nose on. But something told him the lank-haired *Romim* toting a good-sized spear was eyeing him too closely, so he had to let it go and fade back to the end of the line. There hadn't been any more prospects bringing up the rear either.

Shar was waiting for him at the side of the cave, a big man with broad shoulders to match his healthy girth, but which Basha knew to be all muscle. He spat *qat* juice through his trimmed and scented beard and flared his flat nostrils. "Looks like you got nothing," he scoffed. "What were you doing all day, chasing jinn dusters?" Basha flushed. He hoped that Shar hadn't gotten anything today either. That would make them even. But then again, if Shar hadn't gotten anything, he'd be even more aggravated with his own empty hands.

Basha had been following Shar for three or four seasons now. Shar could blow up like a heap of dry grass in the fire, but he was strong and smart and usually found a way to pry enough goods from the passersby to make their lives livable at least. Shar had taught him that taking things from people was a lot better than sitting around begging, as Basha had done since his last older brother had died. Uncle Meerab had said he should wait on *Ilah* for mercy, which was the only way he could stay in his house. Basha had opted for providing for his own mercy with Shar in the wilderness. "Just shut it," he retorted. "Did you manage to get your filthy fingers on anything today?"

"Not much," Shar boasted as he pushed himself away from the wall and thrust a hand into his robe. "Just this little trinket some pretty lady somehow dropped along the way." He held out his hand from which dangled a silver pendant. It was almost as big as his thumb and had the image of a woman or goddess's head surrounded by flowers. "How much will Sufian pay for this?"

Basha tried to take it from Shar's hand to better see it, but Shar yanked it away. "My find. I keep," he warned.

"Whatever you get from Sufian, it's not going to fill my belly tonight," Basha bitterly complained. "Do we have anything left to eat?"

Shar shook his head ruefully as he stuffed the necklace back into his robe. Basha hung his head low and wondered how much *qat* there was left. It didn't fill his belly, but at least it kept his stomach from rumbling. But as Basha hung his head and began to enter the cave, he saw a hint of a smile appear at the corner of Shar's mouth. In answer to his questioning look, Shar jerked his head up in the direction of the long valley down to the riverside. Basha turned his head, half expecting to see a sheep tied up somewhere. When he saw nothing, he asked "What?"

In response, Shar sidled behind Basha, put an arm over his shoulder, and pointed to the middle of the valley. Basha tried his best to see what Shar was pointing at but had no idea what he was looking for.

"Do you see the smoke? Past where the *wadi* turns suddenly south." Shar whispered in his ear. Basha suddenly saw it, just a thread of smoke filtered up out of the brush. It was five or six thousand paces away. Shar had always had the keener eyes. "Near where we found those stray goats two moons ago."

A smile slowly washed over Basha's face. "Looks like a couple of the herd didn't make it back to the fold," he chuckled. "We should pay them a visit and see what they're cooking. We wouldn't want them to be alone for the night. Who knows what thieves and bandits might get to them?"

"We get there first, then," urged Shar as he grabbed a fist-sized stone to sharpen his *khinjar* on and set off, half walking and half sliding down the steep embankment toward the valley floor. Basha followed him closely, wondering why anyone would choose to stay out in the open overnight. Perhaps someone had turned an ankle and couldn't make it any further. Or got sick? Who knows, but whatever it was, it sure made for an easy job.



## And God Gave Him Another Heart 1 Samuel 10:9

"I'm telling you; we need three times that much fuel for this fire," Yoni yelled to his little band as he struggled to break a dead branch from a willow that leaned precariously over the river. "Andreas, my boy, take Ezra, Jason, and Doris up the *wadi* past the second spring. There is a dead *yanbut* there just waiting to be burned. Shem-achad and Shem-du, downriver. Oh, and take Sara with you; she can carry as much as both of you." The branch finally broke free and sent Yoni stumbling into the river, grasping desperately to a living branch to keep him from going in. "Chaim, Salome, Tzedek, and Hilel, upriver with you." He pulled himself and the now soggy dead branch up into the bank and shook the mud from his hands as he motioned to the unmoved listeners. "Now. Go now! What do you want, stone tablets with carved commands?"

They all suddenly scattered like rats from the threshing floor. Yoni dragged his branch to the fire pit in the center of the *chatzer* that doubled as a town market and a waiting area for ferry passengers. He heaved it atop the wood pile that was already up to his waist. Then he cast himself down on one of the stone benches next to Aviva, who because of her advanced pregnancy, was exempt from Yoni's chores. He noted little Ram poking twigs into the gaps of the pile.

"This fire is gonna be big?" he asked with wide eyes.

"Huge," he chuckled. "The flames will be as tall as the hostel."

"But this wood can already do that," the boy lisped with furrowed brows as he prodded the pile.

"That it can. But tell me, my smart young lad, how long will it burn that tall?"

"Not very long, but *Ima* says fires shouldn't be tall for long, don't you" Ram excitedly explained, conforming with his mother. "Tall fires bring *gannabim*, *Ima* says. Besides, it just takes longer to burn to coals."

"But this fire isn't for cooking," Aviva said. "It is to be seen from far away."

"*Ima* is right on all points," Yoni affirmed as he opened the tinder box and started selecting wood to kindle the fire.

“Seen by *gannabim*?” the boy breathlessly asked, half scared and half delighted.

“I hope not,” Yoni replied. “You see, I think there is someone out there, a cousin...a friend, but a great man, who needs some help finding his way here. And it needs to burn brightly for a long time to help him.”

“He doesn’t know the way?” Ram questioned.

“Know the way? Let me tell you something, Ram. This man can find his way anywhere. He could have strolled right out of the Labyrinth without a single thread,” Yoni replied, turning to gaze over the river and toward the hills. “Sometimes I think he is the thread.”

“Then why does he need a fire to find his way here?” the boy said, hunching his shoulders and throwing his palms up.

“His problem is not finding the way, but finding the will,” Aviva tried to explain. “You know all the people who come out here from the city? When they leave, how do they feel?”

“They look pretty happy to me, most of them anyway,” the boy responded. “At least the ones who get wet.”

“And tell me why the wettest ones are the happiest ones,” Yoni encouraged.

“*Ima* says it’s because they feel like they are new, like they can start all over again,” the boy dutifully recited from memory. He looked up at his mother and received an approving glance.

“Good answer,” Yoni chuckled. “There is more than that, but that will do for now. Hand me some of your twigs, please.” Yoni got to his knees and cleared some room in the middle of the wood pile. As Ram handed over some of his twigs he had been collecting to build a little hut, Yoni stuffed them into the pile close to the furry mass of tinder he had selected from the box.

“Those people indeed get to go home and start over again. They’ve got their whole lives ahead of them to do whatever they want. And with what we teach them, they have a bigger chance of finding happiness and success. Who wouldn’t be happy?”

“But not your cousin?” the boy asked as he peered over Yoni’s shoulder to inspect the tinder and kindling. “Is he coming to stay with us?” Ram thought some more, considering that Yoni had hinted that his cousin would not get to start over again. Whether you went home or stayed here, you still got to start over

again, unless. The thought sent a shiver through his heart. He looked at his feet for a moment hunched his shoulders and looked up at Yoni. "Is he coming here to die? he asked hesitantly."

Yoni shook his head and laughed heartily. As he withdrew from the depths of the wood pile, he squatted on his ankles and reached out for his son's shoulder. "You are very perceptive, my boy," he remarked as he pulled him down next to him. "He will stay, but only for a little while. And no, he will not die afterwards. But in a way, he will sort of die." He stifled the boy's concern by putting his thumb to the boy's lips and stroking his cheek with his fingers. "You see, he will not be able to go home when he leaves here, I mean, he can go back to his house, but it will never be the same for him there. Nothing will be the same for him after he comes here. It will all be new, and maybe a little exciting at times, but it will be so hard for him."

Ram considered his father's words in silence, then parted his lips as if to say something, but then screwed his mouth closed again. His gaze focused on a stone by the fire pit. Yoni brushed a fly from his ear as he waited for the boy to reply.

"So, he's kinda hiding out there because he's afraid of what will happen when he gets here? That doesn't make sense," Ram shook his head a little and looked quizzically into Yoni's eyes. "There's nothing to be afraid of here."

"When your goat Misriach goes missing and *Ima* yells at you to go find him, why don't you go right away?" Yoni looked through a raised eyebrow at his boy. "You're not afraid of anything up the *wadi*, you just know old Misriach is going to taunt you and make your life miserable for the next couple of hours."

"Yeah, I guess so," Ram mumbled. "So, are you going to go over the river and yell at him?"

"No, there will be no yelling," Yoni inhaled deeply as he rose to his feet. "Just this great and glorious bonfire telling him 'We're waiting!'" And to himself he thought, "Oh Shueh, God grant you the courage to come! Now is the time."

# Chapter 3

## Author's Notes

Part of this chapter takes place in Miri's hometown. Magdalene's moniker means she was from a place called Migdal. The Babylonian Talmud refers to this location as Migdal Nunayya, or "tower of the fishes." The town currently identified as Migdal is five kilometers north of Tiberias and more than a kilometer from the shore of the Sea of Galilee. However, due to the lack of historical continuity in the region, the original locations of sites are not known exactly. The place name of Tarichaea ("the place of fish processing") is posited by some scholars to be associated with a suburb directly on the lakeshore, only one or two kilometers north of Tiberias. I have chosen the modern location of Khirbet Majdal ("ruins of the tower"), on the shore between Migdal and Tiberias for my Migdal Nunayya. One of the products of this community was a pungent and tasty paste called *garum*, made from fermented fish.

Tiberias was founded between 18 and 20 CE, which is concurrent with the parts of this chapter dealing with Miri. At this time, a modest theater was constructed in the northwest quarter of the city, seating perhaps 5,000 people. It is feasible that a stonemason rooming in Migdal could walk to work in Tiberias each day.

Towers are usually associated with fortification or defense, but a fishing village that was a ten-minute walk from a major city would not have need of such a tower. What other reason was there for a tower, especially in a fishing village? We know from the Gospels that fishermen were active on the lake at night. Perhaps as an aid to fishermen, the town erected a tall building and put lights atop it, to guide those fishing into the night to their wharves.

Characters introduced in this chapter include the following. Characters with an asterisk are based on historical people.

- \*Eyov, Job of Uz

- Miryam bat Yehoyakim of Natzrat, or Mary, Jesus' mother
- Shatach of Tiberias, matchmaker
- \*Yousef ben Yakov of Natzrat, or Joseph, Mary's Husband

Place names in this chapter include the following with their corresponding modern names.

- Gennesaret = The Sea of Galilee
- Ilion = Troy from Homer's Iliad
- Kfar Nahum = Capernaum, Israel
- Migdal Nunayya = Northern suburb of Tiberias, Israel
- Natzrat = Nazareth, Israel
- Tiberias = Tiberias, Israel

## And He Lift Up His Eyes and Looked Gen 22:13

Shueh sat cross-legged on the rock he had found, with eyes closed, his head bowed, and his hands cupped beneath his chin, the way his *ima* had taught him to pray. He tried his best to focus his mind, but it flitted from place to place in his mind where he stored his memory of holy writ. It somehow reminded him of a dove who could not remember its place in the dovecote. *They lie all night naked without clothing, and have no covering in the cold*, he recalled a passage from Eyov, but this was only because he and his wife were spending the night in the cold.

*Notwithstanding I would speak to the Almighty, and I desire to reason with God*, he dredged up a different quote from Eyov. This more expressed the thought of what he really came here for. But his mind wandered again. He liked the overall story of Eyov, he thought, but there was so little action and so many words, it was hard to keep a train of thought going through his mind. Why couldn't the scripture be more like real stories, more like the his own memories.

"You have your mother's lovely eyes, my boy," his elderly *savta* cooed as she stroked his hair and rubbed her leathery cheek against his forehead. Although his mother had told him that his grandmother had died much too early for him to be able to remember her, he recalled this moment vividly. Her brown shawl had tickled his exposed arm, and the smell of onions had been heavy on her breath. He remembered the door curtain had been left open slightly, allowing a stream of brilliant sunshine to pierce the darkness, illuminating motes of dust and fuzz in their lazy dance across the room.

That scene quickly faded to a brighter room where he could see his right hand grasping the *yad* pointer while his left hand strayed perilously close to the roll in the synagogue one winter morning. The *rav* had gently grasped his left hand and held it up to keep it safe, but had then commented that he must have his mother's hands, as the fingers were so delicate. Then *rav* had also grabbed his right hand and pointed the *yad* back to the text. "*Arvach Adonai Yeyehovicha*," he intoned the familiar blessing in his creaky but lilting voice. He had wondered how any hand could become so creased and dry as the old man's; it also was

nothing like his own. Breaking out of his reverie, he held up his hands to inspect them in the fading light. She, seeing his cupped hands, thought he was starting to pray.

“Come back to me. Let us pray together,” she called from where she was sitting cross-legged on their bed for the night.

He quickly rose from his rock and strode over to her. “Who do I look more like, *Ima* or *Abia*?”

“What makes you want to know that?” she asked with more than a little confusion in her face.

“As far back as I can remember, people have said I had *Ima*'s eyes or cheeks or hair or feet,” he explained. “But hardly anyone says I got anything from *Abia*, except his drive to work hard.”

He had been ceaselessly tormented by the other children in their village about his dubious parentage, and both his parents had been somewhat reticent to discuss much about his birth. They would only hold him close and say something like “God gave you to the both of us, of that you can be certain.”

“You are certainly taller than anyone in your family,” is what she decided to say, “and I like you just that way.”

“Thanks, *gamada*,” he chuckled as he patted her shoulder, which barely higher than his own waist, and left his hand there. “How come no one ever makes fun of you for being so small?”

“Because I'm the most beautiful,” she said with pouty lips and a thrust out chin, “and because I'd kick their shins to kindling if they did.”

He quickly swung one of his own shins behind the other. She laughed, showing her bright smile and glittering eyes. He then knelt and put both arms around her.

## A Cloud of Smoke by Day, and a Pillar of Fire by Night Exodus 13:21

Yoni directed Ezra, bringing the final load in Andreas's team, where to dump his huge burden of firewood from his back while Jason, Andreas, and Doris collapsed on palm trunks set around the fire pit. Both the river scrounging parties had returned earlier, having built makeshift rafts to float the fruits of their labor, and had thus produced a larger yield. The Shems had quaffed several pitchers of beer at the hostel before retiring to their homes. Sara and Salome had pitched in to grind, knead, and roll out enough flat bread for both tonight's vigil and tomorrow's breakfast, although Yoni was sure they'd still be up before the crack of dawn. Chaim and Hilel were stacking fuel over Yoni's carefully constructed tinder and kindling. Tzedek had complained of poor digestion and had headed back up the *wadi* to the *sherutim* to be alone with his bowels.

"Tell me this is enough now, *rav*," pleaded Hilel to Yoni as he balanced precariously at the edge of the fire pit gingerly placing a limb as thick as his own on the top.

"Careful," warned Doris from the bench below him. "The last thing we need is a reenactment of Yericho's walls right now."

Yoni looked up from the wood pile to the pyre, gauged its height against the surrounding trees and brush, and decided it was good enough. "That will do, Hilel. Chaim, would you do the honors?"

Ram piped up from where he was sitting by Aviva, "May I help? Please, may I?"

"You may fetch an ember from Yochaved's oven, but only give it to Chaim. I'd rather this be done by an expert."

Chaim flushed at the compliment, but his pleasure was short lived as Jason hooted from his log, "Yep, he started that brushfire last spring with great expertise!"

The rest of the group erupted in laughter and started to add their own teasing comments, but Andreas was quick to put a stop to it. "Let's have no more of that. Why don't the rest of you go



home and wash up? It smells a little more funky here than usual.”

While everyone except Sara and Salome headed chattering up the road to their homes, Andreas watched Ram picking his way from Yochaved’s with the fire pot, and then helped him pass it into Chaim’s steady hands inside the pyre. Leaving him to apply his craft under Ram’s popping eyes, he walked over to where Yoni was squatting, and leaned against a tree.

“You know your cousin is out there?” Andreas cautiously asked. “If he didn’t come over with today’s convoy of pilgrims, what makes you think he is out there now?”

“Last week another of my cousins came out here: his younger brother Yakov,” Yoni explained. “He told me Shueh had come down to *Pascha* with his wife and was planning to come to visit us after the feast. I give him several days in the city, but then he’d come out to see us.”

“But that would have placed him here today with the others. If he wasn’t with them, where is he?” Andreas asked, still quite confused.

“Looking good, Chaim,” called Yoni as he saw wisps of smoke beginning to emerge from the pyre. “Blow on it good and hard.” And seeing his son’s eyes asking for permission, he called “Yes, you can blow too, Ram.” Then, turning to Andreas, he said “Because he’s done this before. Twice, to tell the truth.”

Yoni stood up, flexed his legs and toes a bit, and then turned to face the dimly glowing sky over the Yehuda hills. He related to Andreas the story that Yakov had told him.

“Three years ago, Yakov and Shueh had made the trip up from Kfar Nahum for *Pascha*. While Yakov had been scouting around for some construction prospects in the big city, Shueh had spent all his time with the scholars and rabbis on the temple mount, as he always did. I guess he heard of our little group out here. Apparently, he had lit straight out for us with the next group of pilgrims, but got spooked by something, and was back with Yakov the next day, having gotten only as far as Yericho. He even spent the rest of his time in Yerushalayim helping Yakov drum up some business instead of going back to the temple mount. Then, a year ago, they had come back up for *Pascha*, this time bringing their families with them. Shueh had

made it clear he would be heading out to the river to see his long-lost cousin, and had left early in the morning before any others were on the road. When he returned a couple of days later, however, he admitted he had not made it all the way to the river, but had spent the night on the valley floor instead.”

They heard the fire starting to crackle behind them and turned to gaze at its bright yellow and orange flames as the deep red of the sunset faded to black. “I could never do that,” muttered Andreas as he shivered a bit. “All those *gannabim* out there. That’s a great way to get your throat slit, or worse.”

“In his mind, *gannabim* may be the lesser of two evils,” said Yoni wryly. “Anyway, two days ago another of Shueh’s brothers came for a visit: Shimon, the youngest of the five brothers. He said Shueh had come up again, and was planning on definitely making it all the way out here this time.”

“Lesser of two evils?” Andreas shook his head in confusion. “What’s dangerous or evil about us? I mean, we’re offering a new life, not to take away the one you have.”

“Yes, to some a new life, one full of hope and promise. To others, just another day to tick off in their list of things to do. But for him, if he finds what he dreads to find, it is a completely different life,” Yoni answered in a solemn tone.

## And They Shall be One Flesh Genesis 2:24

As Miri huddled in the warmth and security of his arms, she thought about the reason that drove Shueh here, as well as the doubt that kept him from actually arriving: who was his father?

She had known of this doubt almost as long as she had known him. She had not met him until her own sixteenth year, when he had come to work on the theater in Tiberias and roomed in the boarding house her mother ran near the fish tower. She had seen him in passing among the other day laborers as she brought food to the table for breakfast and supper. Her first conversation with him was when she handed him the sack of mutton wraps her mother had made for his noonday meal. He had been very complimentary of the *garum* and olives that she put in the wraps. He had said something about being grateful for the meal, as well as the hands that had prepared and served it. Not an uncommon statement, but the fact that he briefly but firmly took her hand in his while he said it was what had awakened her thoughts to him.

Her father, a kind and observant man, had noticed her interest in him. Since she was well into marriageable age, he took this as a cue to start sniffing around. The *shadchan* Shatach had been engaged to investigate him and his family to ensure a suitable matching. Shatach had walked to Natzrat, a full day's journey, to visit with his parents and poke around in the community for a couple days. He had returned with another *shadchan* in tow, who had been hired by Yousef and Miryam to do the same at Migdal. Shatach's report was that his family was conservative enough, his prospects were more than adequate, and he had a kind disposition. There was a nagging rumor about the boy's actual father, but the man who now claimed to be his father was an upright and stalwart man in Natzrat. Apparently, the other *shadchan*'s report had been complimentary enough that the match had been arranged.

She had been delighted to have had at least some part in making the choice of her match. She could easily look forward to a life with Shueh. Many girls were married off with little or no say in the matter to men they either didn't know or even feared. But at the same time, although she had looked forward to this

date since her earliest memories, now that it was imminent, she was terrified at the prospect of the match actually happening. Did Shueh think she was pretty? Would he continue to be kind and thoughtful after he had obtained a wife? The thought of the wedding night, although intriguing, filled her with insecurity. Luckily, the date had been set for the moon's third quarter in *Tishrei*, after *Yom Kippur*, and allowing almost five moon's time for her father to bring in the grape harvest and press it.

For these many weeks they had gotten to know each other and found they liked one another well enough. He was three years her elder, but unlike most couples where the age difference was moderated by the wife's emotional maturity, the gap between them was still quite wide. To her, he seemed much older than she, and she looked up to his experience in the world, as well as his height advantage. He was only a bit taller than average, but she, like her mother, was very short. The top of her head didn't even reach his chin. He treated her so kindly, however, and was so interested in her that she knew they would be able to work things out together.

There were the three days when the quarry had been late in delivering stone to the worksite, so he had been able to spend time with her at the boarding house. She had taken him to tour her uncle Mordecai's *garum* workshop where he was introduced to the stink and gore of making sauce from the little sardines caught daily out on the lake. They had persuaded one of her cousins to allow them to go out in the boat for a day to try their hand at catching sardines, but sadly he had been overcome by nausea the entire time. Back at the boarding house, she had shown him some of her needlework. When he had tried his hand at it, his poor fingers had been unable to thread a needle or make even a few knots. In his frustration he had gone out along the lakeshore to hunt for some jasper. He had returned a few hours later with the most intricately carved amulet of a mother and child she had ever seen. When her father had inspected the amulet, he had declared his own *bullā*, inherited from his father, was almost too worn out to set his seal on the wineskin stoppers he sold. The next day he had received a deeply incised copy on a piece of granite that would last many more generations.

Two weeks later, Shueh had completed the barrel vaults he had been contracted to build, and he had to return to Natzrat to help Yousef with some work. The ensuing couple of months were lonely, but flew by as she kept the boarding house by day and completed her needlework for the wedding garment by lamplight in the evenings.

The wedding party had arrived from Natzrat a few days prior to the wedding. She was busy seeing to the preparation of the huge amount of food that would be served up to the wedding party that day. Stacks of bread, pots of marinated olives, baskets of pomegranates and apples, bunches of garlic and onions to season the meat, and bowls of her mother's special *garum*, all had to be gathered, chopped, sorted, washed, and covered. The first morning after their arrival, his mother Miryam had called her out of the kitchen, sending in her own Marta to take her place. Could they talk somewhere privately?

They had sat down together under the shade of a grape arbor that grew above the low stone wall along the lane. The house was halfway up the bluff and therefore looked over the roof of the house on the other side of the lane out to the waters of Gennesaret. The sun was already three hands high in the sky and reflecting off the waters of the lake in a brilliant white orb. The boats had all left the harbor and were bobbing in their chosen area for the day, each attended by a little cloud of seabirds. In the garden, a couple bees had bumbled among the poppies, and some sparrows flitted through the arbor.

Miri had felt as nervous as a sparrow sitting with her future mother-in-law. She had sensed that having dismissed Marta, there was going to be some serious talk taking place. She had worried that she would say the wrong thing; that she would not prove smart or talented enough in Miryam's estimation. How could she be good enough? How could she make sure she said the right things? She had wanted to stand up to tie up a loose grapevine, sweep up the dead leaves in the corner of the wall, or move the salt cellar and pitcher on the table into different places. Instead, she had sat down on the wicker stool and folded her hands on her lap and tried not to bite her lip.

Miryam had begun the conversation complimenting her on how well the preparations were going and on the quality of the

nuts and yogurt they had had for breakfast. But she could sense that there was more on her future mother-in-law's mind than compliments.

"It is an honor to share my name with my daughter-in-law," she had said, commenting on the fact that they were both named Miryam, as well as a quarter of the female population of any town in the region. "I understand my son calls you *gamada*, but I don't think that is appropriate for me to use. What name do you prefer?"

"I am called Miri by most people," she had smiled in return. She had wanted to say it would be nice if her son would too, but she dared not mention that to Miryam.

"Along with sharing a name, there is something else we need to share," Miryam had spoken quietly. Miri had tensed up even further. It was going to be serious after all. What else needed to be shared? Did Shueh have some physical deformity, some secret past? She had blinked her eyes and smiled blankly, trying to prepare herself for whatever would come next.

"What I say to you is not to be shared with anyone, not even my son," Miryam had said, herself looking at a corner of the grape arbor where a bee was bumbling. "Perhaps the day will come when you feel it right to share it with him." Her gaze had then shifted directly into Miri's eyes; her deep brown eyes boring into hers. "But for reasons neither you nor he can know right now, this should be kept to yourself. Treasure it in your heart until the time is ripe to share it with him.

"As you may have heard, Yousef is not actually your betrothed's father. I think he knows this, or at least guesses at it. What he doesn't know, however, is who his real father is," Miryam had said in a pained voice, looking past her out over the lake. "Believe me, if I could find a way to tell him whose son he is, I would do it in a heartbeat. But it is hard for me to even understand, much less explain."

Miri's mind had practically exploded, and it had been all she could do to keep her eyebrows from raising halfway to her hairline. No, she had not heard of this. Was Shueh illegitimate? Had the *shadchan* discovered this and kept it concealed? What would her father think. Would he allow the marriage to happen? And how did Miryam not know how to tell him the identity of

his father? Were there so many men in her former life that it was impossible to tell which one it actually was? What kind of life had Miryam led in her youth?

Miryam had read the concern on Miri's face. "No, my child, don't even think that. When I was given to Yousef, I was just like you. I had never lain with another man before my wedding night, or since." She had paused for Miri to try to comprehend.

Miri had closed her eyes for a long moment in relief, but as she did so, her brow also furrowed as she contemplated the facts she had just heard recited. Yousef had not sired Shueh, but nor had anyone else. Was this a repetition of the tale that some unwed brides told of becoming pregnant from sitting on a latrine seat at the wrong time? She opened her eyes and surveyed Miryam's face. There was no hint of guile or ignorance. Miryam had been stating facts that she believed to be completely true. Miri's gaze had then wandered to the tabletop, where she had found herself moving the salt cellar about. If she were to take what Miryam had said as fact, then there was only one conclusion: as clear as one fish plus one fish equals two fish. "What you're trying to tell me," Miri finally had said haltingly, "is that my Shueh has *no* father?"

The corners of Miryam's mouth had moved in the tiniest hint of a smile. "You are as brave as you are smart," she had concluded. "You have perceived most of what I wanted you to understand, but not all." Miryam's mouth had hung open, her tongue exploring her bottom teeth as she explored what to say next. "Have you ever heard the story of Leda and the Swan?"

Miri had searched her memory, but could not come up with any such story. Was this a test? Should she know it? Or if she did know it, is it something she should not know? She decided the best course of action was neither to confirm or deny, but to suggest that it was in the many writings of the Prophets. "Is that in the *ketuvim*?" she had asked.

"Oh no," Miryam laughed. "It is a myth of the *Goyim*. Leda was a queen of a far-off land called Sparta. Like all queens, she was beautiful and graceful. Two of her children were conceived with her husband, the king. But she had two other children whose conception could not be explained. She claimed they were children of Zeus, who had appeared to her as a swan."

Miri cautiously glanced at Miryam with a look of surprise on her face, which quickly turned to horror, which then melted into a giggle. While she was yet virginal, she knew the symbolism of the swan's long neck. She couldn't believe Miryam was telling her such a tale. She had flushed deeply and hid behind her hand.

"Yes, we all know about the swan, and you'll get to know it even more in a couple of days," Miryam nodded sagely. "And yes, I'm certain the story uses a crude metaphor to acknowledge Leda's infidelity. But the story also cloaks an even deeper idea. How can I explain it?" Miryam had thought for a moment, during which Marta came out of the kitchen to ask how much garlic was supposed to be browned with the butter for the paste they were making for today's bread.

When she had her answer and returned to the kitchen, Miryam's thought, having been turned briefly to food, had been able to pick up the thread again with another metaphor. "Think about the *manna* in the wilderness. Every day for years and years it appeared on the ground. The *Torah*, being a man's book, never tells us what the women did with it. Did they just eat it raw? I think not. They probably boiled it, baked it, or put it in a broth. But did the people ever know how it came to be there, or were they just happy it was there, never asking any more questions?"

"You don't try to explain how a miracle happened," Miri had said in her best *shabbat* voice. "If you can explain it, then it's not a miracle. The works of Adonai can be told, but not explained."

"And that is the answer to the question of Shueh's father, my child," Miryam had replied. "I became with child without any swans coming to visit me. I have reason, sacred and holy to myself, to believe that like Leda, my child was a gift of heaven. I cannot explain the miracle any more than that, but I have told you."

They had sat in silence as the pair of sparrows lit on the edge of the house, twittered to each other, and flew away down the lane. The breeze had blown up from the lake smelling like bulrushes and salt.

Miryam had brushed a fly from her face and continued, "One of Leda's divine children was named Helene, who later became the queen of Ilion, the source of that great *goy* tale, the Iliad. Have you heard of that?"



“Yes, I have heard parts of it being recited in the theater at its grand opening,” Miri answered, wondering if it were acceptable for her to have heard *Goy* tragedies. “*Ima* was horrified when she learned I had been listening, but *Abia* seemed not to mind too much. How do you know so much about *goy* mythology?”

“Yousef hears about it while away at work sometimes. I make him tell me all,” Miryam had said conspiratorially. “Well, most of what he hears from his co-workers. I love a good story, no matter where it comes from. But what I wanted to say about Helene was that from the beginning her life she was marked. She had a destiny, whether she wanted to or not, to become the pivot point around which much of the world turned. I think that’s why the *goyim* attribute her birth as being divine. People who have that much impact on history can’t just be regular men and women, can they?”

Now a different type of unease had begun to flit about in Miri’s breast. There were no problems with Shueh. He did not have some deformity. He was not illegitimate. On the contrary. Because of the nature of his conception, he was something special; something divine. It was not a problem with Shueh that worried Miryam. It was a problem with herself. Miryam did not think her good enough to be her special son’s mate. “And you’re telling me that your son, whose birth you cannot explain, is marked out for something special because of that birth?” Miri had questioned, unable to add the part about her own unworthiness.

“I see why Shueh has chosen you, my child,” Miryam had smiled warmly. “You are quick of mind and of a deep perception. He loves those qualities.” Then, as if in answer to the desperate question that still boiled in Miri’s brain, she went on. “And I think I love them too. I think he has chosen well indeed.”

Miri’s eyes had grown wide, and she gasped audibly. She must have been holding her breath. Tears had threatened to gush from her eyes. Miryam was pleased with her after all. Yes, there seemed to be something that would have to be addressed with her future husband, but those things could be worked out. Pleasing your mother-in-law was a once-and-done, all-or-nothing affair. She had passed the test. She had not wanted to

crumble in the well of emotion that was seeping in from all sides, and so she had turned to humor to lighten the situation and save her some embarrassment. "Well, I'm glad he admires my qualities," Miri said, holding up both hands to either side of her head, her outstretched fingers pointing to the top of her head, and leaving the phrase hanging in the air. Apparently passing her mother-in-law test was not enough. Her soul seemed to crave something more. Yes, Shueh admired her, but did he love her?

Again, somehow Miryam had seemed to sense exactly what she needed to hear. "You are pretty enough, Miri," she had assured her. "Your eyes are a wonder to behold. And with them you have caught my son's heart," Miryam reached out and cupped her chin in her hand.

"You mean," Miri had stuttered, being caught off guard by Miryam's remark. "You mean he is fond of me?"

A huge, warm smile had completely enveloped Miryam's face and a tear had come to the corner of her eye. "Yes, my child. You are very fortunate indeed. Your betrothed adores you. Not many women are so blessed."

Then, the smile had evaporated from her face and was replaced with a look of concern. "Miri, the time will come when Shueh will need to learn for himself who his father is. I have done all I can to bring him up in righteousness according to the law and the prophets. He has become a truly good man. But someday the full truth needs to come to him. If it comes by me, he will doubt it. It needs to come from the One whom he cannot doubt."

Miri had been horrified. She could not possibly tell him this. She wasn't even sure what it was she had just been told. "But how will he know how to find this out?" Miri had blurted.

Miryam's face had melted in compassion. She had reached out and taken Miri's hand, then stood and drawn her over to the east side of the arbor, overlooking the lake. "No, dear girl," she had said in a low voice. "It will not do to come from you. Men must hear these things from other men. When the time comes, tell him that he will find the answer with his cousin Yochanan who lives on the other side of Yordan." She lifted her other hand toward the south of the lake from whence the Yordan sprang. "I don't know how or when the answer will come, I only know that

it is only there that the answer to all his questions will be made clear. Promise me, Miri. You will go with him to cross Yardan someday. Help him find the answers.”

Over the years, whenever she happened to see the south of the lake, this charge had haunted her. But until now, it had never seemed the right time. Then, a couple years ago, soon after the death of Yousef, she had sensed that Shueh was troubled. She could not penetrate his mind to know what it was that made him uneasy. He would not share what his trouble was.

Then, one evening she found him bowed over at his workbench where he could not even bring himself to work on the *mezuzah* he was carving to place by the side of their own front door. She had stood behind him and gently massaged his shoulders. “I know you are troubled at your father’s passing,” she had whispered. “I know you are looking for answers that you think you cannot find anywhere now that he is gone.”

She had seen his eyes close to block tears from flowing. The ensuing silence told her that she had hit the mark squarely. Her conversation so long ago with his mother came rushing back to her. If there was ever a time for Shueh to find answers, it was now.

“I don’t know exactly what it is that troubles you, but your mother foresaw that this day would come,” she told him. He had started a bit at the mention of his mother. He had opened his eyes and cocked his head ever so slightly, waiting to hear what would come next. “She told me to tell you that you will find the answer to your questions only with your cousin Yochanan who lives on the other side of Yardan.”

She had watched his face as the furrows gradually smoothed and his eyes slowly cleared. A faint smile had tinged the corners of his mouth as he muttered “Yoni. That’s right. Good old Yoni.”

So here they were, after so many years had passed, and after several attempts to come out to Yardan. They were so close! When would he make it all the way? And, even more frightening, what would happen when they got there. How would his question be answered? And, like Helene of Sparta, would the knowledge of the answer send him far from home to change the world? Maybe they should not go.

As she sat there enveloped in the strong arms of the man she knew loved her and would ever care for and protect her, she herself began to be of two minds. Maybe they should not cross the Yordan just yet. Maybe just one more season, one more year.

But then she lifted her chin to look into his eyes. He thought it was a prompt to kiss her, which he did firmly and lingeringly, but then she saw his eyes stray back to the river. She knew that, whether she was ready or not, he was ready to take the step.

“Don’t leave me behind when you go,” she pleaded softly.

“Where I go, there you will go,” he responded.

“Thanks, Ruth, but I think it’s supposed to be the other way round,” she giggled at him and sank back into his arms.



## Chapter 4

### Author's Notes

The evening picnic that extends into the night takes place on the northeast shore of the Sea of Galilee, near a place now called Ein Sheva, a waterfall at Tabgha. This area is believed to be the site of several significant events in the life of Jesus, including the feeding of the 5,000 and the calling of the Apostles. This site is two kilometers from Capernaum, an easy half hour's walk.

A day's walk down the east side of the Sea of Galilee along the Jordan River brings one to the modern city of Tabqet Fabel, known as Pella in Jesus' time. Roman ruins have been found at this site, including a bath house with its three pools: *frigidarium* (cold), *tepidarium* (lukewarm), and *caldarium* (hot) pools. While the average Jew was probably not a patron of the baths, they were not forbidden from entering.

The scene where the boy Jesus uttered the memorable "I must be about my father's business" that takes place in the *beit sefer*, or the school for boys on the Temple Mount. I have populated the school with historic characters. I am taking for granted, due to the prevalence of scribes, lawyers, doctors, and priests mentioned on the Temple Mount in the Gospels, that this was a center of teaching and learning. I doubt the existence of a unified school district, but instead imagine various sages of the Pharisaic (*Perushim*) and Sadducid (*Tzadukim*) disciplines conducting sessions in various courts of the temple complex. These sages were called *Tanna'im*, teachers who rehearsed the opinions of other teachers and compiled oral traditions related to religious law. Their views are recorded in the *Mishnah*.

Characters in this chapter include the following. Characters with an asterisk are based on historical people.

- \*Avram, Abraham the Patriarch
- \*Cleopas of Emmaus Nicopolis, Joseph's brother
- \*Elisheva of Yerushalayim, John the Baptist's Mother
- \*Eliyahu, Elijah the Prophet

- \*Gamaliel the Elder, Chief Justice of the Sanhedrin in the 1st Century CE
- \*Horodos, King Herod
- \*Husha, Hosea the Prophet
- \*Moshe, Moses the Prophet
- \*Shimon bar Gamaliel, last *nasi*, or principal of the Sanhedrin before 70 CE
- \*Shimon bar Yona, Peter the Apostle
- \*Yeshayahu, Isaiah the Prophet
- \*Yeshua, Joshua the Prophet
- \*Yirmeyahu, Jeremiah the Prophet
- \*Yitzchak, Isaac the son of Abraham
- \*Yokov, Jacob the son of Isaac
- \*Yonah, Peter the Apostle's Father
- \*Yose ben Yochanan, *nasi* or principal of the Sanhedrin in 2nd Century BCE
- \*Zekharyah, John the Baptist's Father
- Eleazar, member of the Sanhedrin
- Eunike of Korazim, Shueh's friend, Timothy's wife
- Gershon, One of the Tannaim the Temple
- Jashmid, greatest of the Parthian kings
- Karon, ferry operator in Beth-Abara
- Kobie of Natrat, childhood friend of Shueh
- Malkiel, One of the Tannaim the Temple
- Rostam, legendary hero in Persian mythology
- Timotheus (Timo) of Kfar Nahum, Shueh's friend, Eunike's husband
- Tzakhi of Natrat, a childhood friend of Shueh

New place names in this chapter include the following with their corresponding modern names.

- Britannia = England
- Caledonia = Scotland
- Cush = Ethiopia
- Ein Sheva = The seven springs of Galilee, near Tabigha, Israel
- Galil = Galilee
- Gennesaret = Sea of Galilee

- Indike = India
- Kaisarea = Caesarea, Israel
- Karthago = Carthage, Tunisia
- Katane = Catania, Sicily
- Korazim = Chorazim
- Lusitania = Portugal
- Meron = Mount Meron, near Bar Yohai, Israel
- Mitzrayim = Egypt
- Mount Senir = Mount Hermon
- Panion = Caesarea Philippi, near Snir, Israel
- Pella = Tabqet Fahel, Jordan
- Philadelphia = Amman, Jordan
- Pillars of Heracles = Rock of Gibraltar & Jebel Musa, Morocco, which bound the Strait of Gibraltar
- Zippori = Sepphoris, Israel



## A Bastard Shall Not Enter into the Congregation of the Lord Deut 23:2

There had been much scooching and grunting as Shueh and Miri lay down next to the coals and tried to find a comfortable position and arrange the blankets. Then the deafening silence of night had descended as the stars slowly faded into sight. She cocked her head and began to count the stars, something that always helped her drift off to sleep, noting that the twin brothers of *Teomim* were now low in the western sky. He, however, although his eyes were fixed on the stars, was gazing deep into his own soul.

His mind traipsed back home once more, but this time to the bluff edge at the south of town where the boys rolled hoops they had fashioned out of thorn bush branches to try to outdistance each other. On this particular day, he had figured out how to achieve not only a tight and sturdy weave, but also a nearly perfect circle, which had sent his hoop not only to the bottom of the bluff, but halfway across old man Asher's fallow barley field. Instead of forcing the branch in a true line to form the circle, he had felt its sinews wanting to twist along its length. He had encouraged the twist and found that its variance had made it more pliant, allowing it to bend more easily and yet remain true enough to form the desired circuit.

The other boys, most of whom were at least older than he was, if not taller, had not taken well to being beaten.

“‘Born for greatness,’ that's what your *ima* says,” Kobie had needled. “Why don't you run home and tell her how great you were today?”

“Yeah, but too bad your real *abia* will never know,” Tzakhi had hooted.

He had silently left them without retort, following the course of his hoop down the bluff. He wouldn't show it to *Ima*; she didn't really care much about such things, although she did her best to feign interest. He would show it to *Abia* though, and try to explain how he had felt the wood's...what was it? Preference? Tendency? Will? *Abia* had hinted at such ideas when he discussed his stonework and the way that stone had a grain like

wood did. Was this what he had meant by grain? At least he could talk with his *abia*. The other boys said theirs only yelled at them to milk the goats or go find strays.

A sharp, deep intake of breath jolted him from the Natzrat bluffs back to the Yordan river valley. His father. He always could talk to his father. He felt like he could pack everything up and turn this little expedition around right now and go back to his father's shed in the garden, the shed full of chisels, whetstones, hammers, wedges, and half-finished figurines, inscriptions, and amulets, but now empty of him. There they could talk. Whether it was the prospects of their olive harvest, the way a certain stone had almost carved itself, or why people behaved the way they did, he and *Abia* had always been able to talk.

But not anymore. He felt again the aching emptiness that time had not yet closed over. How long had it been? *Ima* had told him frequently that time would heal all wounds, but for him the past seemed always to be present. It wasn't a perfect recall of everything, but what he did recall seemed not to have any distance. And then there was the present. So many times, he watched a scene unfold or heard a conversation develop and knew what was going to happen or be said next, only he couldn't quite put his finger on it. It was like a fuzzy ball of yarn right where he was trying to look, or a muffled roar drowned out the words. He had tried to explain it to Cleopas once, but his uncle could only say that occasionally people had a brief, spooky feeling like they'd seen or heard something before, but not often, and not for long.

Where had this thought come from? He had been thinking about his father, which had passed to time heals all wounds, and then to time. His thoughts were straying as if he were asleep, but he was still wide awake, conscious of his wife's steady breathing as the only sound in the night, of the stars' slow advance across the sky, and of the dim glow of the embers in the fire pit. And yet he could not bring his mind to focus on examining his soul. Why his overwhelming hesitation to complete this journey?

His arm muscles were getting sore from resting in one place, so he delicately lifted his hand from her shoulder and stretched his arm against the sky. He could see its outline clearly against

the spray of stars as he flexed his wrist and rotated his hand. He thought about his hand as he brought it back down to find a comfortable position on her hip. She loved his hands, which, despite having been cut and bashed repeatedly in his work, healed quickly and always without scars. *Abia*'s hands were frequently bandaged and pocked with scars. But his own youthful hands that had reminded others of his mother's were no longer delicate. They were strong and sinewy, but never rough or rutted from his injuries like his father's. When would he begin to look like Yousef in any way?

Across the valley a sudden light kindled brightly. Was one of the tall palms catching fire? He blinked several times as his eyes adjusted to the light. No, the tree was not burning, but someone had lit a large fire beneath its fronds. He gave himself a rueful smile. He could be at that fire right now, but his hesitation left him here by a pitiful pile of embers on the valley floor that was getting colder by the hour.

He had to face up to his decision. He could put it off no longer. He had to decide whose son he actually was.

All through his childhood and youth some of the boys had called him *mamzier*. When he was young, he had thought it meant something about his mother having come from another place, but he had later learned that it meant Yousef was not his real father. How the boys would have known this was confusing. For a long time, he had not noted the fact that his mother was almost always at home, and that it was Aunt Mimi who brought food home from the market. Later he realized that the few times he witnessed his mother leave the home, the other women in Natzrat either ignored her, looked at her with sour distaste, or spat curses at her, calling her *zonow* or *pirutsa*. How could his mother, the most kind and loving and inspired woman he knew, be a whore? She was completely unlike the women he occasionally glimpsed near Bekah's hostel with painted eyes and tight-fitting clothes. His mother never painted her face, and yet it had rich, natural coloring and a pleasing shape. Without even thinking she could sing any of the psalms in the purest, richest tone he had ever heard; not like other women with wobbling voices mimicking the words the *rav* sang. She taught his sisters proper grammar, precise elocution, and courteous manners,

allowing them to mix in the marketplace and fetch the water without being set upon by the other women or girls. How could such beauty, song, and virtue flow from a tavern girl?

While his mother was ostracized in her own town, his father was at least a solid and respected citizen. His stone-craft was widely respected, from replacing broken masonry to carving the tiniest amulet, he was never lacking for work or the resulting coin and goods. When the *Romim* had moved down from Zippori and wanted to place a garrison at the west end of town, it had been his father who had the courage to organize a significant group of men to block it, even though the income from building such a garrison would have been significant. And yet, as much as he respected his father and tried to be like him, he was so unlike him in body. He was tall and wide and had curly hair like his mother's folk. Now, just entering his third decade, his cap was hiding a significant bald spot. His father's head was thick with hair up until the day he died. Other boys grew up to look at least similar, if not exact replicas of their fathers. Though the characteristics of his seed were not visibly expressed in his body, his father's mannerisms and training were evident to anyone, whether from Natrat or elsewhere. When they worked as a team in Zippori the stones they each carved separately fit together almost perfectly every time. When his father had been sick for a few weeks, he had been able to fill in as foreman without the rest of the crew really noticing. And his younger brothers, although they looked much more like Yousef than he did, really didn't mind too much when he gave them directions, whether at home or at work.

He was left with an unsolvable riddle. He was not the fruit of Yousef's loins, yet his mother was the model of piety and purity. From whose root did he spring? What hints she gave of his conception were vague, yet not anguished or resentful, but somehow peaceful and warm. She had the same look in her hinting at this event as she did when his father recited *Pasha* prayers. It was almost as if it were holy or sacred. Obviously, she had not been forced against her will, but the warmth of her memory did not reveal either guilt or remorse, which surely would eat at the center of such a woman's soul. His conception

had been anticipated and welcomed, but Yousef had not been involved.

A child born outside of marriage or conceived before the wedding night was not uncommon. Certainly, women who brought such babies to light were scorned at first, but when the father admitted to a discretion or the rapist was identified, the mother would gradually be readmitted to society and her sins mostly forgotten. But his father never spoke of indiscretion, nor did his mother ever identify the real father. This combination was apparently too much for the women of Natzrat. They were completely unforgiving of her.

Yousef they could forgive. He was the man. Somehow the man bore little shame for the sins of the flesh. Men could discharge their burden and go, sometimes without a second thought, either in the man's mind or the community's regard. How often had he seen men come out of Bekah's still hitching up their robes and going straight to the marketplace, fondling fruit with unwashed and smelly hands. But a woman? She lived on the fringes of society at best and was saddled with the bearing and raising of any resulting *mamzierim*. They gained a reputation among men, which was about the worst thing that could befall women who were mostly nameless and faceless among men anyway. But among women they lost any reputation they might have had. This disparity between men and women had caused him hours of frustrating contemplation. God had created a pair of beings in his own image. Both were the same image of the creator, one was simply *zachar* while the other was *nikva*. Rams had horns while ewes had udders; one ram could service many ewes. But was the male sheep superior to the female? Yes, a strong ram was prized and sometimes passed from flock to flock, but when it really came down to it, it was the ewe that was more prized, both for her matrix and her milk. Why did men think themselves so far superior their *ezer*, the assistant God had created for them, that they disregarded them like so much chaff under their feet.

But when he had felt strong enough to say anything on the subject, he was immediately silenced, by both men and women. This was the way it was, the way it always had been, and the way it always would be. He should not think himself so much

wiser than prophets and sages and *ravvi* (all of whom were men) that he should try to set the world on its head. And so, he had learned to observe, but keep his thoughts mostly to himself.

The observation that he kept completely to himself, and sometimes even from himself, was the identity of his father. If Yusef never admitted, even as he was on his deathbed, that he had known Miryam before their wedding, and Miryam kept the secret as if it were holy and sacred, then maybe his conception had indeed been something special and holy. After all, hadn't his cousin Yoni come to light rather miraculously, his mother Elisheva having been way past the time of women, and his coming revealed in the temple?

The *Goyim* had stories about their gods coming down from Olympus to father dozens of children. Obviously, these were tales invented to cover up the infidelity of both men and women, but the resulting heroes had powers and characteristics that set them apart from men. The stories about these heroes were as embellished as their own Yehudi tales like Eyov and his seven sons and daughters. But there had really been a man named Eyov, and he had been extraordinary, even if the events recorded on the rolls were embellished and the words mostly invented by scribes. Heracles and Jason had probably been the real names of amazing men, and their recited adventures based on something that had really happened, even if the tales that were told were as puffed up as the claims of massive fish that got away from his friends in Kfar Nahum.

Was he the offspring of God? That was, of course, impossible. *Goy* gods were simply immortal men and women. They fought and quarreled, they ate and drank, and they made good and bad decisions. And when gods cavorted with mortal women, they always did it in some disguise, like a bull, or a swan, or a rain shower. The method was obviously a metaphor of the male member, but meant to endow the physical act of insemination with some other-worldly power. This was not the way of the El, or Adonai, or any of the other names the Yehudim gave to the one God. There was real doubt as to whether God even had a body, much less the wherewithal to impregnate a mortal woman. That irreverence besides, their God was above fighting, quarreling, eating, drinking, much less making anything

less than the perfect decision in each and every case. The only time he had ever shown himself had been to Moshe, and that had been with fire, smoke, and earthquake. There had been no such reports of such events in the months prior to his birth. That the God of Israel would stoop to impregnate a mortal woman, even one as pure and virtuous as his own mother, was absolutely beyond comprehension. Whenever that thought had come to him during his musings, he had immediately shouted it down in his head: “*Shema, Yisrael: yehiva eloheinu, yehiva ahad,*” this oft-recited prayer. He was ONE; he could not be divided, and certainly not duplicated in the womb of a mortal woman.

And yet, here he was, the son of an unnamed father, in search of answers, laid out under the distant stars of heaven on cold earth, the only softness and warmth coming from the mortal woman laying with him.

As his attention was turned back to the present, he was startled to hear something. It had been as silent as a tomb out here after dark had descended, but now there was the occasional rustling sound. Was it *gannabim*? It was coming from the *wadi* to the south of their little camp; not from the north where the road was. So, it probably wasn’t bandits, not even people for that matter. As he listened more closely, however, the sound did not come from animals. It was not the scrabbling of night creatures or even the footfalls of goats. Goats made higher pitched, smaller sounds, like hoof on rock or in dirt. These sounds were somehow bigger, more thump in them and less scrabble. He slowly raised his head so he could look down to the *wadi*, but slowly and just barely, to avoid being seen by whatever it was down there.

## And the Fire Shall Ever Be Burning Leviticus 6:13

Basha sat at the base of an ancient palm standing halfway up the *wadi*. He kept his eyes down so that not even the starlight could dim his night vision, and as he gazed at nothing, his ears and nose were straining to sense anything. Once he thought he had heard a low sound like heavy breathing up behind him, but before he could tell where it was coming from, it had ceased. He could smell what the goats had left behind the last time they were here, and certainly anyone setting up camp and building a fire here would have used this for fuel, but he could not smell burning droppings anywhere. The only sound now was the occasional hiss of the goat's eye grass in the evening breeze. Then he heard Shar furtively coming up the *wadi* from further south.

"Didja see any tracks?" Basha whispered. Shar was an excellent tracker, a talent that had led to an occasional sheep or goat on their kebab instead of the tasteless jerboas they normally ate.

"How am I to see tracks? *Alqamar* will not rise for hours yet. Even then, just a toenail paring," muttered Shar. "This is where we found the goats last time, right?"

"You probably can't smell it over your own stench," Basha ribbed Shar. "But yeah, there are piles of it just over the rim of the *wadi*. I'm pretty sure we're chasing an empty pocket, Shar. Let's pack it in."

Suddenly a light flashed out in the corner of Basha's eye. When he turned to look toward the river, he was startled to see a large fire breaking out there. "Look," he hissed to Shar as he pointed over Shar's shoulder.

"What is that?" Shar wondered aloud. They both watched, transfixed by the beauty of the bright light under the black fringe of trees and the purple vault of heaven. This was not a common occurrence. Both men pondered both the beauty of the fire and what it could possibly mean.

"That's where the desert freaks live, the ones that are dunking some of our customers. What the *aljahim* are they doing, celebrating their thousandth convert?" Basha shook his head and shrugged.



“Celebrations mean roasted mutton and beef. You make that with coals, not tall flames,” Shar reasoned aloud. “If those flames were meant for making coals, they would have started in the afternoon, not now.” Shar stroked his chin and sparse beard, twisting its few hairs as he thought. “No, not a food fire. A *signal* fire.”

Basha was confused. A signal fire? The only time he had ever heard of signal fires was when the old men used to tell stories of ancient battles when hilltop forts would signal to each other when some army was approaching. The thought of this made him turn his head back to the city of Yericho, wondering if there might be an answering fire atop its keep. Of course there was nothing, so he turned back to look at the fire in the river bottom. “Who the heck are they signaling to, and why?” he asked.

“Maybe to their friends in the east desert?” Shar thought out loud. “Maybe time to go back home or send in the next shift or something. But if so, there be an answering fire from the hills by now. You know, to let them know they saw the fire. I don’t see answer from the hills.” They both squinted a hand breadth above the dark line of the river to the hills beyond, but could see nothing.

“That means the fire is meant to be seen from *this* direction,” Shar said. “But not meant for the city or any of the hills behind it. That means one of two things.”

“I get your drift,” Basha nodded. “You don’t think they saw us out here and are askin’ us to c’mon over for dinner. More likely, that bit of smoke we saw earlier tonight came from someone they was looking for and who ain’t arrived yet.” mused Basha. “And that means there’s still someone out here. Shar, buddy, we’re gonna find us some dinner yet.”

## I Will Extend Peace to Her like a River Isa 66:12

While Shueh kept his ears pricked for any further noises, he returned his attention to the fire, now burning even more brilliantly. Watching a fire, even from this distance, was almost like watching the endless little waves lap the shore of Gennesaret. He remembered the summer he had been hired to help build the new synagogue in Kfar Nahum when, arriving at the worksite earlier than the rest of the crew, he would sit on the beach watching the waves. It had been so relaxing, allowing his ceaselessly churning thoughts to evaporate into a quiet void, hearing only the incoherent babble of the water and seeing its unchanging rhythm. He wondered, were it possible to see the wind or earth moving, if the motion of these other two of the four elements would be as spellbinding? He then recalled overhearing the conversation of some *romi* officers when he and his father had been helping to build the aqueduct in Zippori. The man had such startling blue eyes, and had claimed that where he came from, a place called Katane (wherever that was?) there was a mountain where one could see molten rocks; stone that flowed down the mountainside like glowing honey. He couldn't even imagine how that would actually look, and how long he could lose himself staring into it. Was there a place where the wind could be seen? He had seen the snow trailing from the top of Mount Senir when he and Yakov had worked on the temple in Panion, Yakov's first year away from home. What if you could somehow get to the mountain top and see the wind lifting the snow off the stone and...

A twig snapped. Not in the *wadi*, but to the west of him, and not too far away, maybe only three or four dozen paces. His senses suddenly gathered intensely in this moment. Miri was fast asleep and breathing quietly. That was a relief. He slowly drew the blanket off his side, half rolled his body away from her and then tucked the blanket close behind her. Then he drew his feet beneath him and slowly rose into a crouch. His eyes glittered in the starlight. His nostrils flared for a slow and deep breath, straining to catch any hint of an out of place scent. He cupped a hand behind his ear to amplify any sounds he might hear. He unfocused his gaze, becoming more aware of his peripheral

vision. He had learned when searching for strays that you could spot them better from their motion than direct vision, and that staring at an indistinct point in the air in front of himself, the perception of motion was enhanced. The other boys may have made fun of him, but they knew who to call for help when their livestock strayed.

Terror began to wash over him. Was it wild dogs? How many were there? He had seen what they could do to a straying sheep. What was to keep them from ripping her apart?

His pulse quickened and he listened for panting or sniffing. This was not dogs. Was this *gannabim*? How many were there? Were they armed? What did they want? He had next to nothing for them to take. But they would take her. And if they took her... No! He must protect her. With what? His walking stick? It was on the other side of the fire. He was strong and could deliver a sharp blow. No, he had never struck another man, but his arms and hands were no strangers to delivering well-aimed strikes upon hard stone. He winced at the thought of striking flesh and bone, but surely his reticence would be overcome by need of self-defense. But again, how many were there? No matter the power and quickness of his blows, he would be helpless against a long *chereb*, or even a short *khinjar*.

But even as his physical senses strained and his mind raced around the grim possibilities of his plight, internally his heart cried out: *Thou that dwellest in the covert of the Most High, and abides in the shadow of the Almighty*. The psalm came unbidden to his lips. Somehow, he could recall all the words of all the Psalms without effort, although he had only read them once or twice. In this moment of distress, they came instantly. "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide under the shadow of the Almighty...You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness."

As he chanted within himself, he felt something like a sudden breeze sweep from behind him. At first it was cold and brought a sudden shiver of terror, but then immediately it enveloped him in sudden warmth and peace.

Peace. Such incredible peace.

He closed his eyes and drew in a sharp intake of breath. Putting his hand to his chest he pressed firmly. His senses flooded with the memory of another night spent outdoors with closest friends under the pale blue sky of a full moon with a fresh but calm breeze full of the scent of jasmine and the sound of lapping waves. Timo and Eunike, a couple from Kfar Nahum who were several years younger than he and Miri, had invited them on a picnic that had lasted late into the night. Timo had toasted a trio of *amnon* he had caught that day. Eunike had baked bread on a large stone in the fire, which they had torn into steamy strips to pick up the fish. Miri had brought a hearty red wine from her uncle's vineyard, which they mingled with water from one of the *Ein Sheva*, a spring just a few paces up from the beach. He had brought some Yordan figs from the market in Pella. He had been there for three weeks repairing the floor of the *tepidarium* and had become very fond of the figs. After dinner, Miri and Eunike had probed him for information about the baths: Had he bathed? What was it like? How hot was the *caldarium*? Was everyone completely naked? They had giggled while he described getting covered in oil and scraping with the *strigil*, and then going into the *tepidarium* with a dozen other naked men. He described the sensation of going from the steamy *caldarium* directly into the fresh waters of the *frigidarium*; that after the initial shock, the body just lapsed into an invigorated torpor.

"Not unlike being full of bread, wine, and fish on a night like this," he had explained.

"Except that we're not all naked," Miri had shyly smiled behind her hand.

"Thank God for that, that would be sin," had been Timo's blunt but serious reply.

"Timo doesn't understand humor yet," Eunike had sighed as she rolled her eyes in his direction. "Someday we'll get him to loosen up."

"No you won't," Shueh had replied. "There's something about Timo. He's always completely honest. I suspect he will never lose that gift."

"Gift?" Eunike had asked. "When I ask him, he always tells me exactly how he thinks I look. Just once I wish he'd stop

telling me how big my belly has become,” she said while cradling her expanding womb.

They had all laughed. The women had of course turned their conversation to childbearing while he and Timo had silently polished off the crusts of bread and remaining figs. Soon enough the women had become silent as they had cuddled with their men for warmth in the cool night and fallen off to sleep.

Shueh had known Timo since his first job in Kfar Nahum, when he had been about seventeen. He had been hired to line some newly dug channels with paving stones to keep the winter rains away from the synagogue the town was renovating. It had been easy and rewarding work, each day being able to look back on significant progress along each channel, noting how well the stones fitted into each other, and how unyielding and firm they were. He had even taken the initiative to find some slabs of slate thick enough to support the weight of a loaded cart and had fashioned them into a simple set of lintels bridging the channel running closest to the synagogue. Timo, who had to have been about twelve at the time, had taken a keen interest in the work, and had received permission from his father Yona to help Shueh fetch stones, cart off the spalls, and keep Shueh’s water pitcher refreshed. Although Shueh knew Timo was destined to help his father and older brother Shimon in the fishing business, their oldest brother having left home to try to find more customers in the city, he could see the boy was interested in much more than catching fish. They had talked about everything from the weather to politics to Greek philosophy, the latter because Timo’s mother was a Hellenized Yehudiyah. Shueh had first heard of Alexander, Aristotle, and even Socrates from the stories Timo passed on from his mother. Each time he came back to Kfar Nahum over the years, he had reconnected with Timo as easily as if they had spoken only the previous day. Shueh approved of his match with Eunike as soon as he met her, noting that she quietly supported his independent ways of thinking. She had a deft way of inserting humor into their chatting that helped the conversation along. He looked forward to any time that he and Miri could spend with them.

“How much did you make in Pella?” Timo had eventually queried. “Enough to put something by?”

“The architect knew his stuff,” he had explained. “He got the right stones for the mosaics, and I was able to match the color shades in just the way he wanted. He paid me two *denarii* a day and gave me a bonus for finishing so quickly too. The daily wage will last me this whole season, so I’d like to invest the bonus. I wonder if Shimon’s father is still favorable to me purchasing another share in his fishery?”

“You’ve already got quite a bit invested there,” Timo had replied. “Shouldn’t you invest in something else, in case the lake goes dry or something?”

“Your attempt at humor, eh?” he had laughed. “But I see your point. Perhaps I can convince Miri’s uncle to let me invest in his vineyard. If the lake dries up, people are going to need something else to drink.”

“As long as he can keep the mildew away, I think that’s a good idea.” No laugh from Timo, just business. “How about buying up some of the land on the road up to Korazim and donating it to the synagogue? I hear the *kohan* is happy to split the redemption fee in half. It is hard to beat the return of the tenth part.”

“Of course, I’ll tithe on my income,” he had frankly replied, “but I’m probably not going to see any return on any investment there, and I doubt the *kohan* would offer me such a deal.”

“You and *kohan* Dov are still not seeing eye to eye?” Timo had asked, peeling the last fig.

“Me and just about any priest,” he had sighed in return. “I think they are all under contract together to spite any idea I happen to have.”

“You must admit, your ideas are pretty revolutionary. New ideas aren’t welcome among *Perushim*,” Timo had countered. “You know that better than I. Why do you even try?”

“Just because something has been around for ages doesn’t make it right,” Shueh had retorted. “I think that some of the stories we tell ourselves are just stories, not the literal truth. Just because it is written so and so in *Torah*, does that make it God’s pure truth?”

“You’d be hard pressed to find a learned man, *Goy* or *Tzaduk*, who would let you run far with that line of attack,” Timo

had warned. "But go ahead and give me a try. I'm pretty conservative myself."

"Very well, how about we start with Noah and his *tevat* full of animals," he had eased himself out under Miri's sleeping form, as he tended to speak with his hands when he really got going. "All learned men I know think that the flood covered all four wings of the world; that every man, animal, and plant on the earth died. Except, of course, Noah and his sons."

"And their wives," Timo had reminded him. "But are you going to dispute whether it was two of each animal or seven? That is not a new argument."

"I don't ever even bring up women when talking with the learned," he had admitted wryly. "It tends to set them off. And no, my argument is not about how many of each animal went into the *tevat*, but whether the flood really covered all four corners of the world. Before we even start thinking about the flood, let me ask you a question. How big is the world?" Then, pointing his finger individually toward the cardinal directions, he asked, "Where are the four wings? How far do they extend?"

Timo raised his eyes eastward over the lake where the swan was starting her flight through the night sky. He scratched the back of his head for a moment, then said "We know Alexander traveled as far as Indike, but the *Romim* tell us that silk comes from even further away, from Serica." He then looked over his right shoulder, over the haze of the main portion of the lake and mused, "Cush, or as the *Goyim* call it, Ethiopia, is to the south, but we don't really know how far. To the west," he said, turning to where the lion was descending toward the horizon, "the middle sea stretches to the Pillars of Heracles, with Lusitania on the borders of the great sea." Then, swinging his head back around to his left, he looked where the two plows circled each other. "I can't remember the name of the province in the north, where all the tin comes from."

"Tin comes from Britannia, but there is a *Romim* province further north called Caledonia," Shueh answered briefly before he had asked another question. "What types of animals inhabit those distant regions?"

Timo was still nodding from remembering the name of Caledonia from his distant memory, but then stopped abruptly.

"I'm assuming cattle, sheep, goats, and the like that are had everywhere, are they not?"

"Yes," he answered, "but think of the games in the arena in Kaisarea on the sea."

Timo scoffed, "I've never been there, nor have you."

"No, but I have worked with people who have," Shuch replied. "They tell of creatures we've never heard of, like a black and white striped donkey, a monstrous lizard that can swallow a man whole, some sort of pig that is bigger than an ox and has a huge horn on his nose, and of course elephants." He stretched his arms to convey the incredible sizes of the animals and was putting his upper arm to his nose and wiggling his outstretched hand high in the air. "They say when they bellow, it sounds like trumpets blowing."

"I've seen them depicted on mosaics in Zippora, but I just thought they were fanciful creatures," Timo admitted. "But then again, our desert camel probably does not live in Italia either. I get your point. Other lands have different animals than here. But how that discounts Noah's flood, I have no idea."

"Think of it. Noah had no idea about elephants. Until the *Plishtim* started using them for war against the *Romim*, nobody had any idea of them. You would think that if two, or seven, or whatever elephants showed up at the *tevat*'s ramp, there would have been some mention made of it. I mean, can you imagine God telling Noah to build this gargantuan stall for some unknown pair of beasts?"

"Yes, I can. Noah was a man of extreme faith and obedience," Timo said a little huffily.

"I'll give you that, but I would have at least wondered," he said as he tapped two fingers on his forehead. "And when those two monsters showed up, I'd have recalculated how long my hay was going to last. But anyway, what I'm trying to say is, how did those animals get all the way across the deserts of Mitzrayim all the way to, to wherever Noah was?"

"All creatures walked or flew or swam or crept," glowered Timo. "It is admittedly a long walk from Karthago to the *tevet*, but it can be done."

"How many days, Timo?" he asked. "How long does it take? What did the animals eat and drink along the way? Or did they



fast for forty days and nights because they were on Adonai's errand?"

Timo opened his mouth to confirm his friend's last assumption, but then closed it again, considering not only elephants, but the river lizard, the striped ass, and the horned pig. Not all animals were like goats, eating anything and everything that they could find.

"And when they came out again," he continued after a pause. "How did they know to march back across the desert and hide out until the *Plishtim* discovered them?"

Timo did not have a reply for this, but simply said, "With God all things are possible."

"I like that. It's hard to argue with a statement like that. May I quote you on that one?" he had chuckled a little. "There's more than animal treks that can make you wonder about the scope of Noach's flood, though," he had gone on, not waiting for Timo's permission. "How about the plants? Look at those dead trees over there," he pointed to a stand of trees standing black and leafless against the moon's reflected light on the lake. "How long have they been dead?"

"Since the high waters about..." Timo began counting on his fingers. "We got the four-oared boat about six years ago, so the year before that. Seven years."

"And how high did the water get?" he queried. "Did it cover the tops of the trees?"

"Oh no, just halfway up the trunks," Timo replied. "But it stayed for several weeks. The roots just rotted out."

"Think of it, Timo," he had said quietly and intensely. "If the *Torah's* report is correct, all the trees and grasses and flowers on earth were underwater. Not just their roots or their middles, but at least fifteen cubits over their tops. And not just for several weeks, but for a full five moons. How dead do you think the trees were, not to mention all the bushes, grasses, and root plants. Imagine the view! Dead trees and slimy, rotten grass as far as the eye could see."

Timo was looking out into the center of the lake. "I've never really considered that part of it," he admitted.

"Surely the seeds of trees and grasses survived the flood," Shueh had continued. "They are tough to kill. But how long

would it have been before there was enough grass in one place to feed even a single sheep, much less the growing family that the pair of sheep must have been producing? How long until Noah would have been able to enjoy a ripe fig or date?"

Timo had been silent for a long time after this. Then he had poked the fire for a few more minutes before replying. "I agree, God would have had to have worked many mighty miracles to regenerate the earth after such a calamity, and there is no record of such miracles. That leaves room for your argument. But how do you square that with what is written in *Torah*?"

"*In the Beginning* records that *ha'aretz* land, the country was covered: the. God says to Noah that the land was filled with violence, and that he would destroy the men of the land. It does not say *olam*, nor does it say anything about the four wings of the world," Shueh patiently explained. "Let's say a wise man walks into Kfar Nahum and says: 'Because everyone here is a thief, a robber, and an adulterer, thus says Adonai, I will kill every man, woman, child, goat, sheep, and chicken in the land.' Certainly, we here should start to get a little nervous, and maybe even the folks up Korazim or down in Kinneret might take notice. But in Yerushalayim? In Alexandria? In Rome? Are they part of *ha'aretz*?"

He paused to collect his thoughts. Some of this he had thought about for a long time, while other parts were just kind of gushing out as he spoke. He had to be careful and not go too far astray. "If it were just the land, our land, the land surrounding the lake, it would be a good idea to build a boat and put our whole family on it, along with our animals and provisions. But when the flood subsided, we could head towards the high ground around Meron. Why could it not have been so with Noah?"

He had paused again. He waited for Timo's brain to work out the reply that had already been made by every sage he had brought this far in a discussion. Finally, Timo came to the same conclusion. "What difference does it make though," he finally replied, "Whether God immersed the land all the way to the four corners and what miracles were wrought, does it really make a difference?"

"Yes, my friend, to me it makes an incredible difference," he had immediately replied. "Think of it. If Noah's flood was

localized to his homeland, what does that mean about people living in the lands of Cush, Indike, Lusitania, or Caledonia?"

Timo nodded and followed "It means they weren't necessarily filled with violence and didn't need to be destroyed; I'm guessing."

"That's a pretty liberal view for such a staunch conservative," he observed as he slowly stood up and stretched his limbs. He moved to where the wineskin hung on a bush, took a short swig, and asked another question.

"Let's take for example the fathers of the *Goyim*," Shueh said, wiping his lips with the back of his hand. "Who was the father of the *goy* fathers?"

"By name? I don't think even the *Goyim* know that" replied Timo.

"Well, if you go back far enough, we *Yehudi* do," he answered confidently. "Do you remember a certain guy called Adam and his wife Ava?"

"Yeah, yeah," Timo rolled his eyes and shook his head a bit exasperatedly. "If you go back far enough."

"Adam and Ava were instructed in the true fashion of worship. Do you doubt that?" he questioned. Without waiting for the reply, he went on. "In *Bereshit* we are given only the direct ancestral line leading from Adam to Lamech. This is because the patriarchs only kept their own direct ascendancy in their memory. They didn't track their uncles and cousins." He then pointed to the stars of the plow in the north, circling their small portion of the sky. "After six or seven generations," his arms then slowly widened to encompass the entire night sky, "Lamech must have been only one of ten thousand of Adam's progeny."

Then, cupping the ascending swan in his right hand, he said "Are we to suppose that Lamech's fifth and sixth cousins independently invented their worship with no regard to anyone else?" he said as he swept an imaginary line dividing the night sky in two. Then turning to the descending lion in the west he said "And are we to suppose that only we have inherited the pure method of worship from Adam?" Then he raised both arms back to towards the north, cupping the plow between his hands and slowly spread them to each horizon as he said "Or is it more likely that as time passed and distance between people grew, that

the manner of worship slowly diverged and modulated, not only in others," he designated the swan, "but also in us?" as he in turn pointed to the lion.

Timo's brows were knitted together in deep thought. Slowly he started putting his thoughts together in words. "At least the *Partim* sacrifice to a single god: Ahura Mazda. The *Goyim*, *Romim*, even the *Plishtim* sacrifice. However, they all sacrifice to various gods at different seasons and for varying reasons. What you're trying to tell me is that all their barbaric forms of sacrifice stem from a single Adamic tradition that was changed over generations and migrations?"

Shueh looked at the ground and nodded, drawing a hand through his hair as in inhaled deeply. He held his breath for a long moment and then exhaled and looked into Timo's eyes. "Yes, including our own tradition as well."

Timo's lips parted as his eyebrows soared into his forehead. "And you wonder why the sages don't like you," he uttered incredulously. "You mean to say that our worship, the festivals, the temple rites, they're all as degenerate as the *Goyim* drunkenly cavorting around the temple of Dionysius?"

"No, not at all," he smiled. "I mean, I like a good skin of wine myself."

"No, you don't," Timo hooted in response. "I've never once seen you anything more than mildly flushed from wine."

Shueh grimaced in embarrassment, but said, "Who knows how the festival of Dionysius started? Was it always a drunken, half-naked brawl? Or did they once have a festival where they raised moderate cups of wine in thanks to the god of harvest?" He sat back on the ground, picked up a handful of small stones, and set them up in a line. "We don't know anything about their past worship traditions. Who knows but that they once had prophets who gave them messages from God? In the place of Avram and his adventures, they may have had a man named Heracles who did many mighty works, or Aeneas who wandered from place to place before finding his own promised land, or Odysseus, or Osiris, or Rostam, or Jashmid, or any other number of mighty men." As he ran out of stones, he put an upturned palm at either end of the line and asked, "Who knows, but that these were all prophets of some sort?"

“Oh, come on,” Timo complained. “Heracles? Osiris? These are either fanciful tales or outright blasphemy. And you call them prophetic?”

“I am not saying they were prophets, and certainly their stories have been watered down or corrupted over generations. But that doesn't mean we can't learn anything from their stories, just as we do Noach's.” He folded his hands together and collected his thoughts for a few heartbeats. Then he stood up close by the fire. This thing he was going to try to explain now was not even fleshed out in his own mind, but had been bubbling in his thoughts for many months now. The slow burn of the flame gave him an idea for how to unfold the idea.

“How long has it been since we, *bnei Yisrael*, have had a prophet among us?” he asked. “How long? I'll tell you. Six hundred years. It has been a dozen jubilees since Yirmeyahu spoke in the name of the Lord. How far afield do you think the priests, Levites, sages, and wise men have led us in that long time? We sit here in our synagogues, congratulating ourselves for being the children of the covenant, but who knows? Maybe even the *Goyim* are heirs to a similar covenant made with some distant great-grandfather? Who knows that their stories of gods and heroes are based on some prophecy they once had? What if, for example, their story of Prometheus sprang from prophecy?”

“Prometheus?” Timo had replied. “Who is that?”

“And you, Timo, with your *Goy* name, don't know your *goy* mythology?” Shueh mockingly chided. “Come sit by the fire while I tell you a tale.”

“But first a small sip. Your tales can sometimes be quite dry and dusty,” Timo teased. After taking a long pull at the wineskin, he sat himself down next to the fire and said, “Once upon a time?”

“Yes, Timo, according to the myth, once upon a time there was an immortal named Prometheus,” he had begun. “He was of the offspring of the Titans, but not one of the gods of Olympus. Don't ask me to try to recite their jumbled genealogy. But as I've heard it said, it was Zeus who had the idea to create mankind. For that task he chose his cousin Prometheus, who fashioned men out of Gaia's clay wet with the spit of Zeus, and into whom Zeus' daughter Athena blew the breath of life. These men

existed in a life not unlike that of our own Eden. No worries, no work, but also, interestingly enough, no fire. This was somehow withheld from them by Zeus, who feared that with fire, they might become like him. But Prometheus had compassion on his creation and stole the divine fire of Olympus and gave it to men. Zeus, furious that he had let the divine spark be had among mortals, punished Prometheus by chaining him to a rock where birds of prey daily fed on his liver.”

“Why didn’t he just teach them how to make their own fire, instead of stealing it from Olympus?” Timo wondered aloud.

“I think it has something to do with the fact that it is not really fire we’re talking about, but perhaps, like in Eden, it has something to do with the divine spark of knowledge of good and evil. But whatever the case, I find it interesting that Zeus let mankind go on using fire, not punishing them for it, but laying the blame for it on Prometheus. Chained to a rock, unable to move or escape, he is daily wracked with the most wretched pain imaginable, tearing out his bowels. But because of his immortality, he never dies from it. He just suffers eternally rather than let Zeus inflict the punishment on mankind.”

“It is a rather grim story,” Timo frowned. “But what does this have to do with *bnei Yisrael*? Which prophecy of ours is it supposed to match with?”

“I can see why you ask that,” Shueh nodded in response. “I have never heard of anyone comparing the myth of Prometheus with anything in scripture, but don’t you find it at all similar to Yeshayahu’s recounting of the suffering servant?” He paused before going on, hoping Timo would piece the two stories together on his own. He was saddened with Timo’s response.

“You’ll have to tell me more about Yeshayahu’s suffering servant. I don’t know which is more annoying, that you seem to have the Law, the Prophets, and the Sayings memorized, or that you can’t remember that the rest of us don’t,” Timo laughed ruefully.

“Yeah,” Shueh said sheepishly. “I’ll admit I forget that sometimes. Please forgive me.”

“Nothing to forgive,” Timo shook his head and smiled. “Just enlighten this benighted soul.”

“Yeshayahu wrote many prophecies that can be interpreted as looking forward to *Mashiach*, who he will be and what he will do. Toward the end of his prophecies, he wrote: ‘*nivze vehadal ishim, ish mach'ovot vidu'a choli*,’” he intoned, more in song than in speech.

“*Targum! Targum!*” Timo called loudly. “You know my Hebrew isn’t that great. Please speak it in our language.”

“He was despised, and forsaken of men, a man of pains, and acquainted with disease,” he translated. “Yeshayahu goes on to say things like ‘whereas we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God,’ and ‘he was crushed because of our iniquities, the chastisement of our welfare was upon him.’ He is likening some future person to what we do to both goats on *Yom Kippur*. One is sacrificed in the normal manner, and the sins of the people are transferred on the head of the second before he is led out and banished.”

Timo looked confused. “I’ve always heard that the identity of the servant wasn’t a man, but us, the people of *Yisrael*.”

“Yes,” Shueh nodded. “That is what *kohan* Dov has told me several times. And yes, Yeshayahu did speak of his servant Yakov and Yisrael in reference to the people, not the individual more than once, as did Yirmeyahu. I’ll give you that. But it seems to me here that it is more personal. We, the descendants of Avram, Yitzchak, and Yakov have been called to endure many a hardship as a people, and there are probably many more trials to come. But is it this suffering, our suffering, that makes us righteous?”

Timo eyes scanned back and forth as he sought to find the answer to that question. “No, I know this one. Wait.” He struggled for another moment until his eyes suddenly focused and brightened. “‘Avram believed, and God counted it as righteousness,’” he almost shouted.

“Not bad,” Shueh said as he lightly punched Timo’s arm. “You do more than sleep in synagogue after all.”

“Hey, I can memorize the short passages with six words or less as well as the next guy,” Timo said with mock smugness.

“But I’m glad you memorized that one, for it is the key.” Shueh began to gesture with his hands, which he found happening when he spoke about something that excited him. “No

matter how many sacrifices we kill, no matter how much blood we pour out, no matter how much we dip ourselves in the *mikveh*, this will not make us righteous before God. We must follow Avram and believe. This is what the sages and wise men have forgotten. They burden us with laws and observances, hiding the pure truth in what my *ima* used to call bears and forest.”

“But believe in what?” Timo asked, genuinely wanting to know.

This was it. This was the time. This is when Shueh had learned he could convince someone of one of his ideas. Not when they refuted him or questioned him, but when they reached out to him for understanding. Such times were not to be squandered. He started to restrain himself and pick his words with great care. It surprised him when, with almost a feeling of someone directing him what to say, the words came out with more clarity than he could have imagined.

“Why do we keep killing sacrifices at every observance, for years and generations? Is it because a single sheep only has enough drops of blood to atone for a certain number of sins? How many sins are forgiven with a single drop of blood? Can it really be quantified? In reality, the lamb and its blood don’t have any power to forgive a single sin. The pitiful wails and the gushing blood are there for a different purpose. We keep doing it because we tend to forget so quickly. They are trying to get us to imagine Yeshayahu’s poor suffering servant, a man, the *Mashiach*. When he comes, he will bare his soul unto death, bearing the sin of us all, to make intercession for the transgressors. If we believe in *Mashiach*, whether we see him or not, it will be counted to us for righteousness. And with *Mashiach*’s stripes we will be healed.”

Timo’s response startled and pleased him. “*Mashiach* created us, brought us the heavenly flame of life, and because our sometimes-evil use of the flame causes Adonai displeasure, he punishes not us, but chains *Mashiach* to a rock where he continually sheds his blood so that we don’t have to.”

“That kind of mixing *Goy* tradition with *Torah* will get you kicked out of the synagogue faster than serving veal with yogurt,” he grinned at Timo playfully. “I have been invited to



leave more than once by priests and Levites who think such things are nothing but blaspheming fantasies. But who is to say that they themselves have not been led astray over the last many years without a true prophet?

“I believe strongly that there is an adversary who works to corrupt every work of God. He was there in Eden and has never left,” Shueh had explored the thought even as he spoke it. “If God revealed his plan to Adam, and Adam passed that on to his children, do you not think that as those children spread over the face of the earth that the adversary would plant false narratives in among the true story to corrupt and change it just a bit, generation by generation? Then, thousands of years later, when Yeshayahu tries to tell us of the importance of the suffering servant, who believes his report?”

Timo questioned bitterly. “I’m supposing that you’d be in favor of equating Osiris’ necrophiliac wife conceiving Horus to Husha and Gomer?” Timo then moved closer to him and put his arm around his shoulders. “Why do you do this? Why do you torture yourself thinking about all these things? What difference do they make to your life? They only make it harder for you, for your Miri, and for those that love you.”

“Because it does matter, Timo,” Shueh had faced him, his eyes pleading for understanding. “Yoni is over Yordan preaching of the coming of *Mashiach*. The priests and Levites think *Mashiach* will come to liberate them from the *Romim*, some sort of Yehudi Alexander or something. But what if *Mashiach* isn’t a king or a priest? What if he’s coming to give us something like Prometheus’ fire, something to make our lives forty times better, without changing what goes on in life or to whom we pay our taxes?”

Timo looked away and shook his head in disbelief. “How many have there been recently claiming to be *Mashiach*? Just because Yoni is your cousin doesn’t make his prediction of *Mashiach* any more accurate than all the others that have sprung up and withered just as fast.”

“But Yoni is different, Timo. Have you heard him?” he asked with fervency. “And he’s not claiming to be *Mashiach*, but only that he is coming. You should go, my friend. You should go down next season and hear his message. I think he’s got the

chutzpah that will convince even a conservative like you to think differently.”

“Perhaps he will. But in the meantime, I’ll give you this much satisfaction. *You* make me think,” Timo had conceded. “I don’t necessarily agree with what you say, but you make me think, at least.”

“Look, I’m not saying it is necessarily true,” Shueh had defended himself, although he was sure within himself that he was indeed right. “All I’m saying is that it wouldn’t hurt to think about it. Would it really harm us to open our eyes to the possibility that stories from outside the *Tanakh* may have a grain of truth and can inform our own worship? I mean, what if Yoni is right, and because we’re looking for the wrong type of *Mashiach*, we totally miss him?”

“So, *rav* wiseman,” asked Timo, taunting him a little to lighten the conversation. “Do you have any idea who this *Mashiach* is? Is he already alive? Have you met him?”

“No,” Shueh had answered, a little too emphatically.

Timo tucked his chin and looked out the side of his eyes in response, waiting for Shueh to say more.

A dozen thoughts had immediately run through Shueh’s mind. His dubious parentage. The ability of his body to heal itself so quickly. The way he could remember scripture as if it had already been in his mind. His ability to craft anything as if he could somehow sense what the wood or stone he was working wanted. How completely new ideas constantly sprang to mind, whether dealing with scripture or business. How comfortable he had felt conversing with the *Tzadukim* in the temple when his parents had accidentally left him behind. How much he had felt called at that time to become a temple worker himself, as if that was his business, and not the business of Youssef. All these things just made him feel different, special, somehow set apart from others. It was as if God had a mission for him.

Yet he was not so different from those around him. He cut his hands just as often as they did. He constantly spilled his food on his tunic, no matter how hard he tried. He had already lost two teeth, making it awkward to chew his meat. He was hopeless when it came to knot-tying, and he got sea-sick the minute he

boarded a boat. The list went on and on. How could he be special in any way with so many obvious flaws?

Did God pick him for some special mission? Was he to give up his trade and become some sort of itinerant holy man, spreading some sort of syncretized message to the masses. Or even more remotely, was he somehow destined to become *Mashiach*? No! No! Not in a thousand generations! This had to be some self-aggrandizing daydream he conjured up because he wanted to be something he wasn't. He had to stop thinking like this.

"No, I do not know who it possibly could be," Shueh finally said through gritted teeth. "How can a person know something like that?"

"I don't know," Timo had conceded. "I really have no idea. I've always thought *Mashiach* would be some mighty warrior, but who knows? But to be honest, if he's to be more like you describe, then I can't think of anyone more qualified than you, my woolly-headed friend."

As Timo playfully ruffled his hair, Shueh's breathing became very shallow, as if he didn't need any air in his lungs. A warmth enveloped him, not from the fire beneath his feet, or from a warm breeze coming in from the west, but somehow from within. His eyes slowly lost focus on the fire and moved out to the stars, seeing them as if for the first time. This was right. He didn't know exactly what was right, whether it was being out late at night conversing on holy things, or his prediction of what type of person *Mashiach* would be, or maybe even that he was special. He couldn't quite tell, but he felt, if it were possible, how God must have felt when finishing a day of creation and said *ki-tov*; it is good.

It had reminded him of when, as a very small boy, he had fallen to his knees to plead for his newborn sister Marta. She had not yet drawn breath, and her little lips and fingernails were turning blue. As he was calling out to God to rescue her, it was as if someone had entered the room and laid a soft hand on his shoulder and whispered lovingly in his ear. "She will live," he had distinctly heard. Tears filled his little eyes as he knelt there trying to hear the voice again. It has been so tender, so sweet, so gentle, yet it had filled him with an unassailable hope. He knew

Marta would soon breathe. And when he heard the cries of joy and amazement in the next room, he had smiled and brushed back the tears, looking heavenward to where he felt the prompting had come.

Here in the cool blue under a brilliant moon, with his friend gently ruffling his hair, he could feel that same hand on his shoulder, reassuring him that his thoughts were not wrong, but that for reasons he could not yet know, he should keep them to himself for a while.

As he drifted back to the present, where he suddenly remembered that he might be in deathly peril, he found the terror of wild dogs or bandits had completely left him, leaving not a trace in his memory. He trusted in God; that the time had not yet come for him to know the reason for keeping his thoughts to himself and knew that he would live to see the dawn after this long, cold night.

He now smiled and eased himself back down to lay beside Miri, carefully pulling the blanket back over him. But not carefully enough. She felt the tug and immediately clutched the blanket, pulling it tightly to herself. He smiled to himself and contented himself with the warmth of her nearness.

## About My Father's Business Luke 2:49

Yoni ambled down the path that led to the ferry landing. Karon, the ferry driver, had turned in for the night. Karon! What was his real name? Yoni couldn't recall it. Everyone just called him after the mythical *Goy* ferryman of the dead, to whom you had to pay your *obols* before he'd take you across the River Styx. Karon's price was significantly less. One *lepta* per person. Animals were half that but rounded up. There was never any change in his price. Of course, camels, cattle, and most sheep and goats made the crossing on their own hooves. Camel drivers kept their feet dry, but herdsmen got their feet every bit as muddy as their herd. But it was too much to ask everyone to hitch up their robes and carry their sandals across. Every other *Yom Sheni* the ferry's owners' agent would hustle down from Yericho to collect the owner's share, except when festivals precluded travel, such as *Yom Tov*, as had this week. It was up to Karon and his sons, however, to see to everyday operations, maintenance and repair of both the boat, its landings, and the cables that connected them.

The ferry had been there in some form or another for hundreds and hundreds of years. Karon had probably inherited the job of ferryman from his father, who had gotten it from his father, and so forth. Maybe Yoni should ask the man his history. But no matter who was running it, its presence was what made Beth-Abara exist.

Long before this little community had grown up, and before the ferry was even considered, this had been the first place to reliably cross the river north of the salt sea. Traditionally this was the exact point where Yeshua had sent the elders with the *tevet habrit* down the bank to stop the waters so that *bnei Yisrael* came across dry shod. It was also where Eliyahu was said to have struck the waters with his rolled-up mantle to cross and climb to the hill at the top of the *wadi* where he was lifted up to heaven. Yoni liked to think that the baptisms he was performing were linked to both events. First, the spiritual sojourner here left his past behind as he followed the ten utterances in the *tevet* across the last barrier into the promised land, although he had to get wet instead of going over dry shod. Never mind that his

baptisms were performed in the old *mikveh* that was fed by the pure waters of the spring at the top of the *wadi*. Second, here also he might cross Yordan in the other direction, with the robe of righteousness removing the last barrier, and climb to the hill that led to heaven. As much as Yoni liked the symbolism of this picture, he was unsettled by its incompleteness. In his mind, everything associated with heaven had to be part of some trifacta, some three-part allegory, and his story suffered yet from a missing third leg. Someday he would figure out what it was.

There was nothing missing from the triangle that centered on Beth-Abara, however. Toward the rising sun, just over the mountains, Philadelphia, a newer *Goy* city, was an easy two-day camel drive away. If you couldn't buy it in Philadelphia, you didn't need it. To the south, skirting along the cliffs at the edge of the salt sea, a week of rough going would bring you to Sela. This ancient city had supposedly grown up on the spot where Hagar had fled Sarah's wrath. Now it was the center of Arabi trade as well as its rampant polytheism. Yoni had heard of a sanctuary there, shaped like the camel traders' dice, that housed hundreds of idols. He shuddered to think of the wrath of a single, invisible God upon a place with so many images to so many gods. But they at least provided wonderful incense, much more to his liking than the stuff from Philadelphia. The third leg of the triangle was, of course, Yericho, a half day's journey from here. Yericho had dates, salted fish from Galil, and of course balsam, the fabled 'Balm of Gilead' that was used not only for its fragrance, but in medicinal poultices of every kind. And all those silks, incense, fish, and dates had to drive over Karon's ferry and stop for food and drink at Yochaved's hostel.

Yoni stood at the end of the jetty, listening to the low thump of the ferry bumping against the stone in the slow river current. Perhaps the ferry should be left on the opposite bank tonight, in case Shueh made a late appearance? Karon didn't mind if you used the ferry after hours, if you could pull it across yourself and you left the requisite coins in the dish he kept out on the bench by the toll booth. Yoni fingered the wooden bollard to which the cross-river cable was anchored. It had become as smooth as the polished marble in Horodos' temple. He wondered whether, in his absence from Yerushalayim all these years, if Shueh had ever

done any work on the temple. There was always so much work being done there, both in stone and wood. He had heard that Shueh was a marvelous stone cutter, specializing in mosaics now. He too had inherited his trade from his father. Yoni wondered how long that had been the family's specialty.

Yoni's mind fled back to the time when he had first met Shueh in person. They had both been twelve years old, but because of the distance between Natzrat and Yerushalayim, his cousin had not been able to make the journey until now. Because they were both nearing the time for their *bar mitzvah*, their families had sent word to each other that a special celebration was in order.

The seder had been especially remarkable that year. Both he and Shueh had been allowed to speak some of the sacred words of the *haggadah* that was normally left to the grownups. He had recited the story of the exodus in the *maggid* while Shueh had led the *motzi matzah*, and *maror* over the unleavened bread and bitter herbs. After *Pasha*, Yoni had gotten to shepherd Shueh and his little brothers on a walk around the temple grounds and Herod's palace. He had been proud that he knew all the names of everything. He loved seeing Shueh and Yakov gawk at how big everything was. They had seldom seen buildings of dressed stone, much less these monumental structures. On the last night, Shueh had prodded his father to allow him to sleep at Yoni's house, instead of in the stinky caravanserais, where the family would be overnighing in order to accompany the caravan early the next morning. But the next day, there had been some misunderstanding, and no one came for Shueh before the group left for Galil. It turned out that Yousef thought he had given Shueh permission to sleep with his cousins at the caravanserais, and had assumed Shueh was among the group as they pulled out the next day. They had not missed him until evening dinner that day in Shilo. Before they could return to the city the next day, the gates had been shut, so it had not been until the third day that they were reunited.

During that interval Yoni had had to return to his studies at the *beit safer*. Shueh had asked for permission to go with him. Because Shueh had not learned his letters, being both from the

country as well as outside the scribal class, Elisheva was reluctant to let him go, but Zekharyah allowed it.

The *rav* was not particularly happy to allow an illiterate bumpkin into his class and showed it by asking Shueh to come to the front, hold the *yad*, and recite the text from Moshe's last book, the *Devarim* roll. Shueh was embarrassed. He knew how to hold the *yod*, and he knew the figures on the roll were letters and words, but they meant nothing to him. While the *rav* had not directly mocked him, he made a point of bringing up one of the other boys, several years younger than Shueh, who took the *yod* and recited the line perfectly. But when he had come to *weichonenaich*, he stumbled a bit, trying to inject the proper vowels. At that point, Shueh had volunteered the correct pronunciation flawlessly, and had continued with the next passage from memory, "Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations; ask thy father, and he will declare unto thee, thine elders, and they will tell thee." The *rav*'s jaw had dropped open, and it was several heartbeats before he told Shueh to go on. Shueh had continued reciting, while the *rav* had followed along in the roll, checking for accuracy. After four or five lines of text, the *rav* had said that was enough, and Shueh was allowed to sit. The *rav* had not called on him again.

The next day, however, there were several *tanna'im* waiting in the classroom. They had been from the *bnei Bathyra*, who had been ousted from the leadership position in Yerushalayim around the time Yoni had been born. They were itching to find a way back into power, so they investigated every irregularity or portent. An illiterate country boy reciting scripture was something that warranted immediate investigation, if only to ferret out some malign power among them.

"Where did you learn to read, boy?" *tanna* Gershon had asked him brusquely.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but I cannot read," Shueh said meekly. "I thought that had been demonstrated yesterday."

"Don't get saucy with us, boy" *tanna* Malkiel had snapped. "Clearly you recited a long passage from *Torah* yesterday."

"Yes, sir," he replied, "But I was just repeating what my own *rav* in Natzrat had read once."



“Once?” Gershon asked. “He recited it once? And you remember it perfectly?”

“Yes sir, I can remember everything I hear.” It was true, Yoni thought. Just the night before they had stayed up late with Yoni crafting the best gibberish he could come up with, and Shueh spouting it right back at him.

“Anything? You can perfectly recall anything that you hear?” Gershon was incredulous.

“Well, as long as I’m paying close attention,” Shueh had admitted. “I don’t remember everything I ever hear.”

“Well, how about this,” Eleazar had challenged: *“Ve'al taarbee shayacha im ha'ishya. bee'ishemto amru, kal vachomer bee'eshuet haveru. mikhan amru hahamim, khal zman shue'adam marbee shayacha im ha'ishya, gorev ra'a leatzmo, uvotel middevari tora, vesofu yorev gaehennom.”*

Shueh had knitted his brows together and been silent for a long enough moment that Eleazar thought he had won. “Too much for you?”

“No sir,” Shueh had answered. “But it is not from *Torah*, and I have not heard it before.”

“Yose ben Yochanan was a wise man, nonetheless,” Eleazar intoned. “Go on boy, repeat it, if you can.”

“But I do not like to say things that are stupid,” Shueh had said simply and innocently.

Eleazar was incensed. He stepped close to Shueh, bent down and slapped his cheek sharply. “How dare you, a little boy, pronounce judgment on the sages. Now, do as you’re told and repeat Yose’s wise words.”

Without flinching from the sting on his cheek, Shueh had squared his shoulders and said “Let thy house be wide open, and let the poor be members of thy household engage not in too much conversation with women. This with regard to one’s own wife, how much more does the rule apply with regard to another man’s wife. As long as a man engages in too much conversation with women, he causes evil to himself, he neglects the study of the Torah, and in the end, he will inherit the fire.”

Yoni had watched as Eleazar’s eyes grew wider with amazement at each sentence Shueh uttered. He had clearly been bested. But Yoni knew that Eleazar would not let it go.

“How is that stupid, boy?” he had snarled at the end of the recitation. “Tell me how you think Yose spoke amiss.”

“Did not Yose have a mother?” Shueh had quietly asked in return.

Eleazar had been dumbfounded. Then, defensively, he became annoyed. “Boys listen to their mothers. But men do not. You don’t know this yet because you are not yet a man. If you are a hundredth part as wise as Yose, maybe you will learn that someday.”

“You do not think it important to converse with your wife then, noble sir?” Shueh had asked.

“Of course not,” he had almost shouted. “What does she know about the law or the prophets?”

“Perhaps not much, but she may have told you about the rip in your robe that is revealing more of yourself than you should in public.” Shueh had held out his upturned hand, gesturing toward Eleazar’s crotch. “My mother has said things wiser than I have heard here. And when the time comes for me to marry, I hope to get a girl who isn’t stupid or afraid of me, like...” his voice trailed off.

Eleazar had turned a deep crimson, clutched at his robes, and stormed out of the courtyard, surrounded by stunned silence from some of the *tanna'im*, and loud guffaws from others. Yoni remembered desperately trying not to burst out in laughter and had to grasp his mouth tightly.

One of the hooting laughs had turned into the voice of Gamaliel, one of the *Bathyra*’s chief antagonists, Hillel’s own grandson. What was *he* doing here? But he did not look as though he wanted to grill Shueh so much as to continue putting the *Bathyra'im* to shame. He called out “*Minin aeide, thea, Piliadeo Achilios.*” After a condescending look at the others, he turned a patronizing glance at Shueh. “Can you say that?”

“Sir, that is *Goy*,” Shueh had responded. “Are such words allowed in *bet safer*?”

“Never mind what tongue it is, can you say it?” Gamaliel encouraged, looking to his opponents, daring them to intercede.

Shueh had repeated it word for word, as far as anyone of these conservative *Yehudi* could tell. Then he said “And the *targum*, if I may use that word, has something to do with a

goddess singing about the rage of a man named Achilios son of Pilios? I do not know who these men are, nor do I believe in goddesses, but that is what you said.”

Gamaliel had stepped forward, knelt, smoothed Shueh’s cheek and then tousled his hair. “Never you mind goddesses or heroes,” he had chuckled. “And if your mother taught you to think and to speak like this, then you listen to her every word. Not just until your *bar Mitzvah*, what, next year? No, you follow and take care of that woman the rest of your days, my young man.” As he stood up and looked back to his retinue, he said a little more loudly. “Are you able to attend to me tomorrow morning?”

Shueh and Yoni had shared bewildered glances and shrugged shoulders. But Yoni had motioned for him to go on. “Yes, sir,” Shueh had answered. “How early, sir?”

“Come share my breakfast after morning prayers,” he had smiled graciously, looking around at the other elders with savage eyes. “And since you probably cannot be separated, bring your...”

“Cousin,” shouted Yoni, unable to restrain himself.

“Bring your cousin with you. I shall see to it that we have enough bread and cheese for two young appetites.” With that, Gamaliel had turned on his heel and paraded off, followed by his retinue in close formation. The *Bathyra'im* in their turn stormed out, leaving Shueh and Yoni alone among a few, much older *tanna'im*. They motioned the boys to come sit next to them in the shade. These men were wise enough not to demand the boy perform, but made themselves available to answer whatever questions he might have. Shueh could not be stopped. What was the exact process of killing and sacrificing the different animals? What did they do with all the blood that was shed? Where did they get the water to fill the basin? How did they keep it clean? Eventually, when Zekharyah had had to come to the school to fetch Yoni home for dinner, there had only been two of the oldest sages left.

Yoni had laid awake in his bed that he shared with Shueh long after his cousin had surrendered to sleep. How did he do it? The memorization part aside, how did he know what to question? In Yoni’s mind, you didn’t question things like the

sacrifice. You just learned how to do it perfectly. That's what his father had taught him. Precision. No mistakes. Word for word. Shueh knew all the words. He might not know all the motions, but he wanted to know. And more importantly, he wanted to know why. And Shueh wasn't just wanting to know what the ancient sages had said nor what was written in *Torah*. He wanted someone to interpret afresh the meaning of, well, everything. That was the night Yoni's own life changed. No longer would he seek to give just the expected answer. No longer was it sufficient to be thought of the boy who could advance to fill his father's shoes because he was every bit as knowledgeable, practiced, and polished as Zekharyah. From now on he would not be afraid to figure things out for himself.

He had remembered that time when he and some other boys had ventured out to Mount Zion on a winter's afternoon and found a rotting tree. He had wondered what was underneath, so had picked up a thick piece of damp, crumbling wood. Underneath he had found ugly grubs and spiders. The wood had gone flying, and he had jumped back, brushing dirt from his tunic. He had vowed never again to investigate such things. But now, when it came to matters in *bet safer*, he would not be afraid to turn over every branch, root, and stone to find for himself what was under there.

The next day, Zekharyah had accompanied the two boys to breakfast with Gamaliel, leaving word with Elisheva to send Shueh's parents there, as they were expected to arrive soon. The bread was the finest Yoni had ever had, absolutely no grit in the flour. The cheese had just the right amount of bite and salt. And there were fresh pomegranates! Gamaliel's teenage son, Shimon, who had not been present the day before, had taken up questioning Shueh and evaluating his answers.

It was at this point that his parents had rushed into the room, flustered and embarrassed to have found their son in the presence of such exalted people. "You will excuse us, most gracious sirs," Yousef had stuttered, bowing and covering his head with his hands. "I am but a humble craftsman and this is my son. We have come a long way to bring him back home."

Shimon had replied "Craftsman, eh? Are your studious abilities going to help you in your father's business? Maybe you

should consider leaving your parents and coming here to study? Doesn't this," he said, motioning to the desk with its rolls, carpet draped walls, and rich food, "have more appeal than, what, a stone worker? A carpenter? A boat builder?"

Shueh, who had rushed over to his mother's embrace, craned his head back toward Shimon and said "Does not Moshe say 'Do ye thus requite Adonai, O foolish people and unwise? Is not He thy father that hath gotten thee? Hath He not made thee, and established thee?' Wise sir, while I have been here, I *have* attended to my Father's business." He paused to extricate himself from his mother's clutches and to place his hand on his father's arm. "I see no shame in continuing to follow my father, whom the Father has ordained, and learn his business."

An uncomfortable silence followed for a few heartbeats, until Miryam grabbed Shueh's chin, looked into his eyes, and motioned to Shimon. Shueh nodded and bowed, then returned to Shimon's table. *The beneficent soul shall be made rich, and he that satisfies abundantly shall be satisfied also himself*, he quoted from the Sayings. I thank you for sharing your time, your wisdom, and your food with me."

Whatever prickliness had arisen in Shimon from Shueh's refusal of tutelage was melted away by his show of graciousness. "*The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life; and he that is wise wins souls*," he replied from the same book.

"Yeshueh, this must be your mother?" Gamaliel asked. "Are you going to introduce us?"

But before Shueh could even open his mouth, Miryam was already replying. "There is no need of introduction, *rav* We have already been introduced, Mali ben Shimon. You have only forgotten."

A confused look clouded Galamiel's face. He leaned forward to focus on Miryam's face. Suddenly his eyes flew wide, and a smile brightened his entire face. "Miryam bat Yehoyakim! Of course! Who else could have raised this amazing boy?"

Shueh and Yoni exchanged bewildered glances. How could these two know each other? He was the most respected doctor of the law in the world's very navel, and she was a peasant woman from a distant farming village. But when they looked to Miryam and Yousef, they both beamed at having been recognized.

“We served together in the temple years ago,” Miryam explained. “After I was betrothed to Yousef, my parents sent me here to live with Elisheva. I worked with her at the temple distributing the sacrifices and washing the linens and such. Mali...” She paused for a moment in embarrassment and then corrected herself. “Rabban Gamaliel was a young doctor at the time, and he was very kind to me.”

Yoni was suddenly aware that Shueh had turned his full attention on Gamaliel with a look of doubt on his face, as if he suddenly suspected the man of something untoward. But as Yoni himself regarded the looks on all the other adult faces, he could discern no hidden glances or shifting eyes.

“Miryam served here with dignity and distinction,” Gamaliel responded. “I was sorry to see her leave, and so abruptly. But it appears her departure has led to even greater things,” he said, graciously motioning to Yousef. “You have sired a remarkable son. How full is the rest of your quiver, my good man?”

“There are as yet six polished arrows there,” Yousef replied humbly, while obviously being proud within. “Perhaps more will come?”

“And your craft?” Gamaliel inquired.

“I am a stonemason,” Yousef replied.

“Then may your sons and your daughter’s sons yet build palaces for kings with many, many rooms,” Gamaliel blessed him. “But in the meantime, your son here seems to have quite an appetite for my bread and cheese. May I send some with you on your journey home?”

Gamaliel then motioned to his son, whose face was blank for a moment, until he realized that he was being told to send some vittles with the departing party. Shimon in turn motioned to the servants to pack up the remaining food. Before they could get far, however, another servant who had apparently anticipated his master’s hospitality, appeared with a parcel already wrapped up.

Zekharyah had then excused them all and ushered out of the room. Shueh and Yoni had shared a quick goodbye, and he had been rushed out of the city to disappear back into the countryside. Yoni had not seen him again for two years, and that was the last time he had seen him.

As he gazed out into the darkened desert, he wondered if he would see him soon. But even as he gazed, the fire suddenly billowed to a life of its own behind him, and he laughed out loud and called back up to the courtyard “Ram, stop blowing. Look what you’ve done!” By the time he had walked back up the switchback incline, the boy had started dancing merrily around the fire singing a little song. “Andreas, I’m worried this fire might not be enough,” he said in a low voice as he turned and found Andreas sitting on a palm trunk. “I’m worried that there may be *gannabim* out there, and Shueh may have his Miri with him. Go wake up Shem-du. Take him and Ezra. Grab some torches and stout sticks and head up the road to Yericho.”

“And do what?” blurted Andreas, fully surprised and more than a little anxious.

“Just go out there and make some noise. If there are *gannabim* out there tracking Shueh and Miri, the sound of those two monsters and yourself will be sure to scare them off.” Yoni watched as Andreas stared at him with open mouth for a few moments, then looked down, shut his mouth, and headed off to rouse Shem and Ezra.

Yoni quietly chanted to himself, “*Yevarechech yrhovaha veyishemamerich...*” as the three of them lit torches at the pyre and headed down to the crossing with much noise already. “Adonai bless and protect you, Adoni deal kindly and graciously with you, Adoni bestow favor upon you and grant you peace!”

# Chapter 5

## Author's Notes

As noted earlier Tiberias was founded between 18 and 20 CE, meaning that much work would have been required of itinerant stonemasons in the region. As is usual with Greek and Roman construction, the site for building a city's theater would be on the edge of a hill, usually resulting in a beautiful vista for those attending an event at the theater, whose events were always during the day. The city was built under the direction of Herod Antipas who ruled from 4 BCE to 39 CE. Although not originally groomed for the throne by Herod the Great, he was brought up as a prince of the kingdom in the luxury of Rome. When his father died, the Jewish kingdom was divided among four of his children. Antipas, not being the favorite, was not put in charge over Jerusalem, but over two disjunct areas: Galilee (the area surrounding the western shores of the Sea of Galilee) and Perea (the area east of the Jordan River, including Beth-Abara). He was considered very friendly to Rome. Tiberias, named for the successor of Caesar Augustus, showed just how friendly to Rome he was, building theater, baths, and temples right over the top of a Jewish burial ground.

Characters introduced in this chapter include the following. Characters with an asterisk are based on historical people.

- \*Antipus, Herod Antipus, Tetrarch of Galilee
- Aryan of Philadelphia, Yara's secret lover
- \*Horodos *HaGadol*, Herod the Great
- Sempronius, The architect of the city of Tiberias
- Yara of Philadelphia, wife of Shar



## Hast thou not known? Hast thou not heard?

Isaiah 40:28

Shueh thought about throwing the blanket off again. It was amazing how much heat Miri's little body could generate, he thought. He thought again how much better this night might be passing were he tucked into a guest room on the other side of the river, or better yet, back in his own home. If only he could be sure of what he was supposed to do. Wouldn't it be so much easier if someone had told him from the beginning what he was supposed to do with his life? If he was who he suspected and dreaded, shouldn't there be more direction? Why was he left alone to make such weighty decisions?

He closed his eyes, the cool creeping in at his back reminding him of the day long ago in Tiberias. He and Timo had been working on a barrel vault entrance into the theater.

"Raise it three fingers more," Shueh called to Timo as he steadied the stone dangling from the strap. He heard the handle wind and the ropes straining as the rock elevated just as directed. It was high enough now. It could now be swung into place. "To the left now," he called. The pivot groaned as the rock edged into its proper alignment. "Just a hair more...stop!" Shueh called out. He stepped closer to the stone, eyed it closely, and then pulled his hammer and chisel from his belt. "There's a tiny bump here, hold on," he called. He pushed the chisel between the new stone and its neighbor, adjusted the aim of the end, and then gave three sharp blows with the hammer. He blew the dust away, eyed the stone again, and said "Right, now drop it!"

Shueh held his breath as the stone lowered into place, grating against the stones on either side. He let his breath out when he heard the tiny click of the stone taking its place in the arch. He placed his flattened hands against the flanking stones, almost feeling them transfer their weight inwards. "That'll do," he called out, turning around to flash a grin at Timo at the winch. "As usual, nice going."

"I'm surprised you had to adjust the stone," Timo laughed as he secured the winch, and then leapt up on the new arch to remove the block that attached the stone to the rope. "Normally they fit on the first try."

"There is a first time for everything," Shueh bantered as he stepped down off the platform and dusted off his shoulders.

"And speaking of time, I say it is time for dinner."

"Fine by me," Timo called, hopping down from the arch.

"Those pickled sardines have been calling to me for some time now."

They both walked deeper into the barrel arch they had been working on for the past few days, found their satchels tucked neatly between two barrels of rope, and plopped themselves down on the barrels. Shueh took a long pull at his pitcher of water and then started rummaging about in his satchel. "What do we have here today?" he wondered aloud. "Bread, fish, *garum*, and, what's this? A hardboiled egg? Will wonders never cease?"

Timo was too busy pulling the cheesecloth off his jar of sardines and practically gulping the fish and bits of onion. "Your little friend takes good care of you," he mumbled from behind his hand, keeping the seafood from sight. "She'd make a great wife, you know."

"Except that I'd step on her all the time, the little *gamada*," Shueh joked back. "But you're right, I'd always eat well."

They both sat back against the cool stone wall and munched their meal in quiet for a while, waving away the occasional fly, and picking crumbs from their tunics.

"Did you ever consider being anything else, Shueh?" Timo finally broke the silence after polishing the inside of the jar with his finger and licking it. "I mean, boys grow up to be what their *abia* are, that's a given. But you know, did you ever think about what else you might do?"

"Sure, I think everyone dreams about things being different: a different trade, a longer fishing boat, bigger fish," Shueh admitted. "Except you. You like the small, bony ones best, I think."

"That's where all the taste is," Timo proclaimed. "But seriously, what did you think of being other than a stone mason?"

"Truth to tell, I've always dreamed of being the one designing the buildings, instead of just putting them together." Shueh's eyes wandered to the ceiling. "I've built some amazing basilicas and temples in my dreams."

“Oh boy, don’t get carried away, brother,” Timo tutted. “I’m not talking about changing skins entirely; no goats turning into heifers. Take me, for example. I come from a long line of fishermen, but since I’ve got two older brothers perfectly capable of managing the shop, my *abia* consented to me going off and learning how to be a mason.”

“Mason’s assistant,” Shueh corrected him. “And it probably isn’t permanent, just a way to get you out of the house for a while and pay your own way.”

“But even if it becomes permanent, I’ll still be working with my hands and earning a day’s wage,” Timo defended himself. “We learn to work hard and live a frugal life. Our life’s path is pretty much known from day one. Learn a trade, usually what your *abia* does, marry who the *shatach* tells you to, have as many children as you can keep alive, and try to live to see a few grandchildren born.”

“So, you agree,” Shueh said, perhaps a little too excitedly. “We should know what’s ahead. If you’re born to be, I don’t know, a barley grower, you should know from day one all about the secrets of barley, and dirt, and irrigation, and whatever else it is they need to know. Isn’t that right?”

“Well, yeah,” Timo agreed, looking a little confused, as if he didn’t know exactly what the argument was.

“And if you’re supposed to be something big, like an architect,” Shueh continued even more emphatically, “Someone would start you young learning your angles, and rock types, and foundations, and grades, and such.”

Timo thought for a moment, exploring the inside of the jar for any tasty morsel that might be left. “For us commoners,” he reasoned, “I think yeah, the more we know, the better. But when you start climbing the ladder to people like architects, tax collectors, and such, I’m not so sure.”

“How is it different?” Shueh asked, sitting up on his barrel and arching his back in a crackling stretch.

Timo pursed his lips and scratched at his still hairless cheek. His eyes suddenly brightened as he jabbed a finger in the air. “How about our beneficent patron?”

“Who? Sempronius?” Shueh asked. “He’s an architect, but I know little of him.”

“No, not him,” Timo also sat up. “I mean the big man, Antipas himself, the one financing the whole city.”

“All right, enlighten me,” Shueh said, leaning back again against the cool wall.

“Who was Antipus’ *abia*?” Timo asked. Not waiting for the obvious answer, he continued, “Horodos *HaGadol* himself. When he was born, did he know he was going to be *HaGadol*? Of course not. He wasn’t even Yehudi! Sure, he was born of a different stripe, a wide purple one. But ruling over all *bnei Yisrael*? His *abia* surely didn’t send him to king school and surround him with a bunch of scribes and lawyers. The way I heard it told, he had to fight for everything he got, with his life on the line a time or two. No, Horodos didn’t know what was in front of him, and he certainly wasn’t told anything about how to go about it.”

“And you’re telling me that’s what made him great? I’m not so sure he was all that great, anyway. What was it Caesar said about him?” Shueh shook his head a bit. “But you mentioned Antipas. Where does he come into it?”

“Horodos had to learn to be a king. He made plenty of mistakes, but he also accomplished some amazing things. Antipas was born a king,” Timo snorted. “And what has he accomplished? The boy probably never even so much as bruised his finger or ever went without his favorite treats. Life was so easy for him, never having to do anything for himself. And look what he’s become.” Timo suddenly looked sharply up and down the corridor and seeing no one else about, he whispered. “The man’s a weasel, Shueh. Oh sure, he likes to lavish his money around and build these fine buildings, but that’s more Sempronius than him. I’m sure he’d rather just sit around with his concubines and vats of wine.”

“Pretty harsh, don’t you think?” Shueh cautioned. “We don’t really know much of what goes on in the palace, so I’d be careful passing on saucy gossip. But you are right, Antipas is not the same measure of kingliness as his *abia*.”

“So, you get what I’m saying then,” Timo summarized. “It’s fine for us commoners to know our lot, because there’s not a lot we can do to change it. But for someone born to the purple, where there’s so much already going on inside you because of

your parentage, it's a better bet to let them figure it out on their own. When it comes to them served on a silver platter, they just assume the role without any thought. But when you must fight to figure it out, it's just a better quality."

Shueh ran his fingers through his beard thoughtfully. "Not to mention that people don't really respect the man inheriting wealth so much as they admire the man who got it in the first place."

"Yeah, I guess so," Timo replied.

"So, if I were to be some great individual, like a king or a prophet," Shueh spoke softly, his eyes flitting with each thought. "You think it would be better for me to have to figure out who I was instead of having it told to me? That's what people respect. I mean, when it comes right down to it, prophets and kings alike have to persuade other people to do things they don't necessarily want to do. And if I had achieved the station on my own, rather than having it given to me, I'd be better at persuading people?"

Timo cocked his head at Shueh and asked, "Was this another one of those discussions where you just answered your own question, and you're not even going to tell me what the question was?"

Shueh was quiet for some time, lost in a flurry of thought. After a few moments, however, he raised an eyebrow to himself and caught a little breath and sighed. Then, turning to Timo, he said, "The question is why aren't you moving the winch for the next segment of the barrel vault when all the stones have already been dressed?" Shueh flashed a grin back at him. "You do the heavy lifting and leave the heavy thinking for us adults."

Heavy thinking indeed, Shueh thought as a cold wind on his face awakened him back to the camp. Cold blackness stretched away in every direction. The stars, providing only ornamentation, but no real light, were impossibly far away. He was on his own. Well, she was with him. But they were one. They were alone. Their decisions and actions were completely their own. There was no heavenly light spilling down to point the way. Only a flickering fire barely cresting the horizon to which he was being pulled unwillingly. Was this the answer? Or was it a vain hope?

## He Divided Himself Against Them by Night

Genesis 14:15

Shar and Basha had been picking their way northward out of the *wadi* toward the road for the last half watch. They made each step deliberately, swinging both feet and clothing clear of brush and grass, testing the ground before putting full weight on it, and pursuing paths that continually diverged and rejoined with each other to cover more ground. Any communication was done with pointed glances, hand gestures, and mouthed words. Basha had not thought of it much before, but he found that he and Shar didn't need to talk to get the message across. A glance and a nod were all that was needed for them. While others required as long as it took to milk a goat to get a message across, they could get it done in the flick of a camel's tail.

For many long moments now, they had both been stock still. Shar had heard something. He made it known by a quick downward thrust of his hand and an airy sibilant that mimicked blown grass. Following his own command, he had squatted as low to the ground as he could, even bending forward to put his elbows on the ground. Basha had learned from him that when you searched for something, being tall was good. But when you had sensed it close by, you needed to get low. This was both to avoid being seen, and it brought out the dark silhouette of your quarry against the starry sky. Basha had followed Shar's example and was craning his head to see over his shoulder in the direction he was gazing. Basha had learned a trick of his own as well. He slowly rocked from side to side, blurring his eyes a bit, and watched as the dim outlines of objects changed in relation to each other. This way, even in the dark of night, he could get an idea of how far away something was, and therefore how big it might be.

There it was: the form of a prone body. Tapering legs, wide hips, the dip of a waist, and the hump of shoulders. He could not see a head because of a patch of goat grass. But yes, there was a person up ahead, only twenty paces away. He softly laid his hand on Shar's shoulder, then reached even farther forward and pointed to the form. Then he traced its shape in the air. After a few heartbeats, Shar grabbed his hand and pressed. He could feel

a tremble of excitement in the grip. Then Shar pumped his hand a few times before letting it go, as he looked back at him with grinning lips and eyes.

Basha tapped his chest with the long finger of his right hand, then opened his hand with palm facing his chest and moved quickly toward his left shoulder, finally turning it away from his body and thrusting it forward. He would swing around to the left. Shar gave the tiniest of nods and pointed two fingers over his own right shoulder. He would take the right flank. But then he brought both palms back toward Basha, side by side facing down, and lowered them slowly three times, each time slower than the last, breathing each time he did. Basha should take care to go slowly, carefully, and be in position in the time it took to hold one's breath three times. Basha then brandished his thick walking stick with a questioning look, to which Shar closed his eyes and shook his head. He pulled his *khinjar* from his waist and drew the dull side of the blade menacingly over his own throat.

Basha shook his head sharply. Yes, you should have your dagger drawn to scare folks, or if they had their own knife ready, but to go directly for the kill? No. That was too much. He clenched his fists and crossed his wrists and then held an open hand over his mouth. Why not just bind and gag the idiot? He was dumb enough to light a fire and camp out in the open.

Shar's face contorted in anger. "*Mughafal*," he mouthed distinctly while he tapped his forehead with all the fingers of his right hand and then threw the fingers open into the air. Then, glowering through knitted brows, he slowly pointed a finger directly at Basha, and then slowly drew his right index finger from his left ear to his right. He held Basha's gaze for several moments more as if to dare him to disagree. No matter how the attack turned out, Shar was going to force Basha to slit the man's throat.

Basha lowered his eyes in acknowledgement and then turned to slowly rise and head off to his left. This was crazy. This was nuts. He sucked in his first deep breath as he trod as softly as he could. Basha had never killed before. Sure, his father had made him kill goats. Everybody did it, so he had to as well. The first time he was forced to do it, all he managed to do was to scratch

the goat's neck, causing it to yell and buck. When he actually sliced the living goat's flesh and brought out the spray of blood, he had trembled and could only with difficulty hold back the retching that arose from his gut. That night sleep had not come for hours, and he had had hideous dreams.

His first breath was stale. He opened his mouth, let it out without a sound, and drew in another, heaving his chest and then mashing his lips together to hold it in. Basha had to admit to himself: he was a coward. Why else did he always snatch and then run? Why was he always the one galloping away from the scene of the crime like a stallion with his tail held high in the air? He had always backed down from fist fights, whether with kids or other thieves and robbers. He didn't know how to defend himself against attack. The thought of taking a blow to the face or having a knife slice his arm melted the bones in his legs and made his thighs burn. Someday he would have to draw blood, or spill his own, and learn how to take the pain without running from it.

This second breath had not lasted as long as the first. Basha's heart was racing. He opened his mouth and let the air escape slowly and then drew in his third breath even more slowly. He could do this. The man lying on the ground in front of him was probably already wounded. He couldn't defend himself. He probably wouldn't even wake up until Basha had his *khinjar* halfway into his left earlobe. He's just a beast, Basha; just a goat. And you won't even see the blood. It is too dark. No one will see the blood. Not even heaven.



## Give Them a Miscarrying Womb Hosea 9:14

She awoke with a start. There had been the hiss of wind through the grass, but it didn't sound right. She replayed the sound in her head. There was indeed something wrong. It didn't come from several different directions at once, but only from the direction of the *wadi*. And it was immediately gone. This was bad. Wind and grass had not made the sound. Animals didn't make such sounds. Such sounds only came from *gannabim* when they were hunting you. Inarticulate but excruciatingly horrible fear welled up inside her. She clutched the blanket to her breast and held her breath, trying desperately not to cry out in a deafening shriek of horror.

She was just about to shove her elbow into Shueh's ribs when two things crossed her mind. The first one was that just because there were hunters making noises, it did not mean that they had been spotted yet. She might have time. The second thought was that, if you suddenly jostled Shueh awake from deep sleep, he always started loudly and sucked in a huge breath. If they truly hadn't been spotted yet, this would surely give their position away. The best she could do was wiggle her hips and shoulders in a way that might bring him out of his deep, silent sleep. She tried this for a few moments, but there was no response. Her mind raced back and forth, willing her husband to awake, and going over the terrors she had heard recounted in whispers among her girlfriends: robbery, assault, rape, death, or even worse, slavery. What would be their lot?

"*Adonai Eli, Adonai Eli*," she mouthed silently over and over and over. She could not slow her mind down enough to utter a proper psalm, but only these words. She was a good person. She tried her best to be good. Shouldn't her God save her in this moment of utmost need? Then she thought of those that had been waylaid by *gannabim*. Were they all bad people? Were such crimes only allowed on bad people? Hadn't her great aunt Naomi been robbed once? She was a good person. Would God protect her now?

He certainly had not protected her before in her greatest moment of need, no matter how she had cried out. It had been several years after their wedding when she had finally been able

to carry a child past the early stages. Prior to this her time had not come for one or two moons in a row, but the excitement had soon faded amid cramps and bleeding. But finally, she had been able to hold on to a child. Her belly had started to show, and she had frequently given in to the urge to cup her bulging belly in her hand. There was a life there. She and Shueh could finally become a real family. But then came more bleeding and cramping like she had never felt before. She knew what it meant and immediately took to bed.

With her mother-in-law constantly by her side, she had prayed every psalm she could remember, and even just cried out to God her own real words. Please! Please spare the child! It has been so long. This is what I should be doing. Please let us be happy and bring this child to light. Her mind and lips had never ceased the endless variations on this plea long into the night. She was simply doing what God expected of her. She was trying her best to be a good wife and to become a mother so that she could be a good mother to this child. Her husband was the best man in the world, and he deserved a child. They would bring up their child in the best possible way. Why can't you hear us? Why won't you let me be better?

Late in the night the bleeding had become profuse. The pain was worse than anything she had felt before. She had fainted. When she had come back to herself, two days had passed. Shueh was at her side. He had told her that she had been delivered of a dead little boy, and that she too had been on the verge of death. The midwife had applied many poultices and forced some pretty stinky draughts down her throat. Now she was better, but the woman had said that because of the damage, she doubted whether Miri would be able to conceive again.

The next weeks had been a haze of darkness and tears. The grief was overwhelming. It was a pain unlike any other she'd ever known. It affected both her body and her soul. Her body had ached, not just her loins, but her bones and sinews. She felt empty and hollow. Sometimes she was angry at her own body, other times at the world, but mostly at God. She couldn't understand why this had happened to her, when she was just trying to do what God had commanded her to do.

She had noticed how adversely her husband was affected by her despair. He had brought some work home, copying some deteriorated frieze stones from a temple in Zippori, so he could answer her every call. He fed her in bed, helped her walk to the *sherutim*, and brought her fresh flowers or herbs to brighten their room. But his smile was forced, and there would be long intervals where neither of them said anything. The pain was just too great to be talked about. But the silence was even more weighty and painful.

On one of the few occasions when they had forced themselves to discuss the miscarriage, she had broken down in sobs and tears, apologizing for not being a good wife and bringing him sons and daughters. But instead of comforting her as he usually did, he was contemplative and silent. After a long pause, he had begun to quote scripture. This had only maddened her. Couldn't he find his own words and not hide behind the *Nevi'im* and *Ketuvim* all the time? But before she could open her mouth to chide with him, she listened to what he was quoting.

"Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise Him; He hath put Him to grief. When thou shalt make His soul an offering for sin, He shall see His seed."

"What does that mean?" she had asked, sincerely wanting to know.

"I don't exactly know," he had murmured in reply. "Perhaps something about not seeing the rewards of our faith until after trials and grief?" But he shook his head and thought for a while longer. Finally, he reached out his hand and laid it on her head and said something that sounded different from his normal way of speaking. "Miri, I perceive that you are precious to Adonai, and for some reason, although he cannot make it known to you at this time, this pain is for a good reason. But in the meantime, I can feel that, if it were possible, the Lord God is shedding tears along with you at this moment."

The sound and meaning of the words embedded themselves immediately in her ears and on her soul. They brought an immediate comfort that almost immediately had her out of bed and back in the kitchen and garden. And they left a reverberating echo in her memory that had bubbled to the surface every now and again, always accompanied by a tear in the corner of her eye.

But try as she might, she could not hear the echo of that promise in this moment. She was again in dire peril, this time not for the life of her unborn child, but for her own life and her husband's. She was here supporting him in his time of need, supporting her mother-in-law in helping him find the answer in far off Yardan. Was God watching? Was he weeping at her distress? Why couldn't he just stop his crying and reach out with a pillar of fire or a cloud of smoke? Why was she not worthy of such a miracle?

A movement caught her eye down past her feet. A hunched figure with outstretched hands was silhouetted against the starry sky. It stopped and seemed to look right at her. Another sound sounded behind her. She turned and could sense, but not see, another vague form about the same distance away. Her eyes filled with tears. Her lips drew open and her jaw dropped. She heaved her chest and drew in as much air as she could. She poised her elbow to awaken Shueh and tensed her leg muscles to rise as quickly as she could.

## The Murderer Shall Surely Be Put to Death

Numbers 35:18

Shar had found the spot from which he wanted to launch his attack after a single breath. He rolled his eyes and shook his head as he watched Basha pick his way to the opposite end of the camp, a little too far away in his mind. He could hear him breathing, although the sound seemed to come from over his right shoulder. Sometimes the night air did odd things. He looked about him while he waited for Basha to settle in. The stars were pretty enough; the crown of *Taga* was just rising over the mountains that ringed his home. But he hated being out in the night. He would much rather be inside. Not inside his cave, by God no. He longed to be in his home. Home! With its soft carpets, golden lamplight, scented air, and looking into the dark eyes of a soft woman.

He shook his head and blinked his eyes. Not now. Not in this instant. He could not go back home in his mind when killing was imminent. Of course, it had been killing that brought him to where he was, he grimaced wryly. And because of a woman, too. What foolishness! Yes, she was beautiful. And yes, she had been his. She. Yara. A hard days' work was easy, because she was there. Long journeys were shortened, because she was at the end of each one. For the first time in his life, it had been easy to pray, to give of his wealth, even to fast, because she was by his side and her hands were guiding his. But she had been unfaithful. He had seen her looking after him as he left their home. He. Aryan. He had forgiven her. It was just a look. But the day when Aryan had given her a knowing look, and she had blushed in return, he knew she had strayed. His rage was meant only for Aryan, and he had vented that rage quickly and secretly. No one could have known. But when he told his Yara, she had cried! Tears. Hot tears. She cried for Aryan. How could she cry for him? He thought his rage was quenched, but no. Before he knew it, she too was gone. Her blood was on his hands. It could not be kept secret.

He took what he could and fled into the night, into the desert, into oblivion. His home, his woman, his life was all taken from him. Now his feasting after a day of fasting was replaced

with bits of bread and gristly meat. Now he dwelt in cold, dark caves with rough and smelly men. Some of those men who had tried to take some of his poor provisions had ignited his sudden rage, a rage he was finding it harder and harder to control. The more he tried to bury it, the brighter it flamed. But who would tell those men that he was trying? Their *jinn* hovered near him, especially in the night in the open. No, they could not harm him. They were mere dust and wind. But they never left him. He knew he could never return home, but oh how he wished he could silence the voices that whispered in the air around him.

But even as they swirled around him, he knew that it was a just punishment. Unlike most of the other men he was forced to associate with now, he did not incessantly cast blame on others. It was bad luck. It was fate. If only so-and-so hadn't done thus-and-such. Why couldn't they just once have the guts and reason to blame themselves for their own lot, like he did? Why couldn't they see that their own choices were simply stupid? Why couldn't they stop jabbering about how awful other people were, never acknowledging they themselves were outlaws, the scum of the earth? There were times when he could almost screw himself up to go home, admit his fault, and take his punishment, if only he could trade these jackdaws and *jinn* for peace and quiet.

And now there would be another *jinn* to haunt the desert, but at least this one would not be on his hands. This spirit would not chase after him in the dark. Basha would finally get the taste of blood and the pang of remorse. Would it harden him, temper him? Or would he hide his guilt in boasting and bragging, pinning the blame on the victim? It was time to find out. He drew his dagger and looked past the lump of darkness that was soon to die. Was Basha finally ready to kill?

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As Basha felt his third breath growing stale, he could still see the person, a dark stain amid the lighter earth and blowing grass. Was it two people? He thought he could see two heads. He looked back down to pick his path more carefully, but when he looked back to the quarry, he froze. There were eyes on one of the heads looking at him. Then they looked away, the head turning to look in the direction Shar had gone. Surprise was gone. What should he do? The man might have his own dagger

waiting, or a longer stave at his side. Basha needed to alert Shar. But what could he do? His little bird call he had perfected was great during the day, but birds do not usually call out at night. It would alert their prey every bit as much as it would alert Shar.

Nothing to do but to rush in as fast as possible, making as much noise as he could to cause confusion. So, he steadied his stance, let his third breath out, replaced it with a silent gasp, and held his *khinjar* at the ready.

# Chapter 6

## Author's Notes

When Roman armies conquered a people, to keep that peoples' soldiers from raising rebellions, the Romans would hire the conquered soldiers to serve in the ranks. Sometimes these conscripts were sent to distant lands, sometimes they served at home. However, these recruits would not be given the weapons of a standard Roman soldier but serve as light infantry or archers. These divisions were known as auxiliaries. It was the duty of the archers to precede the vanguard of the Roman legion and shower the enemy with arrows from afar. After they had spent their arrows and inflicted the first round of casualties, they would retire and let the big brutes charge in for the real action. However, in serving under Roman leaders, they often had the chance to pick up the language of the conqueror. Thus there might have been veterans of these auxiliaries in many communities of the Jews.

The

Characters introduced in this chapter include the following. Characters with an asterisk are based on historical people.

- \*Melech Dawid, King David of Israel
- Reuben of Beth-Abara, assistant ferry operator



## Not in the Wind nor the Earthquake 1 Kings

19:11

When Andreas and his companions had finished hauling the ferry across the river and climbed the little rise up to the valley floor, they heard a voice come from the toll booth at their left. “That will be three *lepta*,” it called out. “Or should I charge four instead, since those two weigh half again as much as a normal person?”

“You are up late, Reuben,” Andreas answered as he began to poke about in his pouch for the required fare.

“As are you,” the toll collector spat back. “What’s with the fire and the torches? If you’re going hunting, you’re not going to catch anything but moths at this hour.”

“We’ve got some business up the road,” Andreas said tersely as he put the fare in Reuben’s waiting hand. “I don’t ask about your business, so you needn’t ask about mine.”

“Alright, alright,” Reuben waved a hand as he retreated to the booth. “But going anywhere with those two is bound to end poorly.”

Ezra and Shem, barely holding their tongues, followed Andreas away from the booth, through the sleeping village, and to the outskirts of town. There Andreas called them to a halt. “Put out your torches for now,” he directed. “We’ll keep this oil lamp lit, but hidden inside your tunic, Shem.” They had a lamp specifically designed for portability, not more than a finger’s length in breadth, and about as tall as a hand with the thumb extended. It looked more like an odd piece of fruit than a lamp. The wick was tucked low in the lamp’s throat, making the flame impervious to the winds of the desert.

Shem took the lamp and tucked it into his breast. “Why douse the torches?” he whispered. “Doesn’t Yoni want us to be seen?”

“Yes, but at the right moment, Shem,” Andreas replied. “On Gennesaret we used to take torches out on the water at night. The fish would follow us from far away. But the fish were the hunted, Shem. We were waiting for them with nets.” He strode out along the road as he motioned to the others to follow him.

“Our little fishes had no teeth to cut our nets or take off our fingers. Do you think these fish we’re hunting are as helpless?”

Ezra grunted in reply, “Nor are we mere fishermen.”

Ezra had grown up on the *Yehudi* hills where he had tended to wandering flocks. Like Dawid of old, he had killed his share of predators while protecting his flock. He gripped his walking stick tightly in his massive hand. It was heavy and long and had delivered both gentle messages to straying sheep and more convincing ones to wild dogs and even a big cat or two. While he was a bit taller than most men he knew, he was much broader than any except the fat priests at the temple. And his breadth came not from eating dainty food, but from turning massive amounts of regular fare into the bone and muscle needed to shift loads at the caravansaries where he had spent the last six years. “I’m not afraid of a little mixing up,” he boasted, remembering the times he had had to teach those slimy camel riders a thing or two.

Shem vigorously nodded, looking down on the back of Andreas’s head from at least two hands’ vantage point. While his limbs were stringy in comparison to Ezra’s bulk, they were long and strong. In his youth, his sudden and great height had contributed to him being one of the most sought-after vinedressers around, as he didn’t have to move a stool about to do his work. His two years in the auxiliary archers had put muscle on his stringy arms, and he could pull a bow with the speed and strength necessary to at least put many arrows in the air, even if his accuracy wasn’t that great. He alone among *rav* Yochanan’s group had killed. It was a consequence of his discomfort with killing that had made him abandon the auxiliary and to seek out the cleansing of the *rav*’s baptism. And since he could not go back to anywhere near the *Romim* or the *Herodyanim*, he had chosen to stay with Yochanan in the desert, ducking out of camp if there were ever any military types in the daily crowd of pilgrims from Yericho. “So, if we’re not going to flush them out with the torch, then what?”

Andreas strained his vision to the either side of the pitted track that marked the road to Yericho. “The first thing we’re going to do is not talk,” he commanded. “Ezra, pick up your feet.

You're scuffling. And Shem, blow the snot out of your nose or breathe through your mouth. You sound like an angry cat."

Ezra walked on the balls of his feet, as he knew he should. Shem emptied both nostrils, one at a time, onto the desert floor. Listening to his breath afterwards, however, he decided he should breathe through parted lips. Andreas led the way for five or six hundred paces. Ezra and Shem followed closely, their own eyes and ears scanning ahead and behind. Andreas held up his hand as he scanned the low mounds to the south of the road where a *wadi* cut deeply into the valley floor. He thought he saw a shadow on top of one of the mounds. But it was now gone. He should pay more attention to that side of the road. He signaled them to move on.

Andreas fought within himself. When should he light the torches? When should they break out in shouts? If it were too far away from any *gannabim*, they would hardly be frightened, but would adjust their hunt to attack the attackers. But what if they walked right past both the robbers and Shueh? What if the robbers heard their little party coming and attacked them first? Several times Andreas made up his mind that it was the moment to act. Now, light the torches and run yelling up the road. But each time a stray thought would commandeer his attention: that rise is too steep, the boys are too far behind, the breeze certainly is cold tonight.

They had traversed several hundred more paces when all these thoughts suddenly blew away from his mind like chaff from the threshing floor. He turned to his companions and frantically waved to get off the road into a small depression on the left. Andreas had no idea why he had done this. He had just felt the sudden, almost overpowering premonition to leave the road. Was it because something was coming down the road? Was it because they were too visible there? He had no idea why, he just reacted.

At the edge of the road was a sharp slope that led down for a few paces before leveling off on a rise that extended out over another small *wadi*. Ezra kept an eye on the road behind them, in case anyone followed from that direction. Shem and Andreas followed the broad ridge of the ridge another thirty paces until it started to descend into the *wadi*. After Ezra caught them up, they

squatted, and each scanned a different portion of their surroundings. What were they looking for?

## Rest in the Lord and Wait Patiently for Him

Psalms 37:7

The warmth of Miri's nearness was beginning to fade without the blanket. Shueh was cold, but because of it, he was alert. The sounds he had heard coming down the hill had paused for a while, but then had split up. The easier one to hear had worked his way fifteen or twenty paces past his reclined feet, while the other, easily seen as he was silhouetted by the southern stars, was only ten paces in front of him. But before they had separated, he had heard a bit of sliding rock and some soft footfalls on the little rise behind his back, leading up to the road. These were from at least two men, but if they were connected to the men stalking him down the defile, then this was an expert military pincer move. Why the *Romim* would be out stalking him at night was impossible to comprehend, so he removed it from consideration.

The two men now poised to invade his camp from the south were obviously *gannabim*. They had been hunting his position for almost a full watch. They must have come from Yericho, having seen him slip off the road right before sunset, or perhaps they had spied the sparse smoke from their evening fire. These would be men who preyed on the daily traffic between Yarden and Yericho, not just the pilgrims who went out to see Yoni, but commercial traffic coming in from Ammon. These would be skilled highwaymen, and a dangerous lot, even if only two of them.

But the men on the rise behind him had just arrived. They had come from the road, although whether from Yericho or Yarden, he had not been able to determine. He had not heard their approach coming down or up the road. Normally, people traveling on the road at night would bear torches. Yes, it made them an easier mark for any bandits that might be out and about, but they also had flame at the ready to wield as a weapon, which made the flame more a deterrent than a weak point. These men had come without torches, which meant they were hunters as well. But what were they hunting?

Perhaps they had come from Yericho? The *gannab* might not actually have started out with himself as the target. Perhaps they

had robbed a merchant bound for Yericho of some precious treasure and had fled into the low hills and *wadis* in which he now found himself. While seeking a place to hide, they had come across his camp by accident. The men on the hill above were hunters hired by the merchant to find the robbers and recover his treasure before it escaped over the river. However, the more he considered it, the less plausible it sounded. How would the hunters have discovered the robbers in the darkness of night when he could barely see them just a few dozen paces from him?

Then he remembered the bonfire at Beth-Abara. Yoni was trying to lure him in that night, and when the flames had drawn no refugees to its light, he had sent out a fishing expedition to catch him and his wife in their net before he could change his mind and head back to the Galil. This, he thought, was far more likely. But why, if Yoni had already lit a fire, had the fishing party not come with torches and songs? That certainly would have scared away the *gannabim*, wouldn't it?

As he tried to sort this all out in his head, he found himself beginning to doubt again. Why had he placed him and Miri in such danger anyway? They should be over Yordan already, if he had not been such a coward to face his future. Or perhaps they should not have come at all. All this questioning about who his father really was, and who he might be, was all a bunch of wild imaginings of a desperate little person trying to make himself into something he wasn't and didn't deserve to be. He should be home cutting stones and helping Miri tend their garden.

"Adonai," he called out desperately in his head. "Help me! I don't know..."

Even before he had finished the thought in his head, the calm he had remembered from the night at Gennesaret enveloped his whole being. It didn't just leak into his head or come crawling up his back. It was like being dunked suddenly in the warm waters of the *caldarium*, with the waters bursting through his skin and into the deepest recesses of his body. He looked from one robber to the next, and heard something going on above and behind him, but it meant nothing to him. Whatever happened, whether he was ripped and gutted by robbers, trampled by an army of merchant soldiers, or force-marched by Yoni across the river in

the dead of night, it didn't matter. He just needed to let himself go. He just needed to watch and absorb and learn.

While he had been focusing his attention so intently on his surroundings, he had become oblivious to what was happening in his own camp. He played back his memories from the past few moments and recalled that his wife had suddenly tensed. Her breathing had become shallow and quick, and her hips had begun to push against his legs. You *shmulik*, he chided with himself for being foolish. While worried about what was going to happen to them, he had forgotten that she too might be wondering and fearing the same thing.

Next to him, Miri, who had taken a deep breath and was tensed to spring when the *gannabim* made their move, suddenly felt his arm drawing tightly around her waist. His lips touched her ears. "Wait," she more than felt than heard him mouth the words. "*Elohim shom'a*." God hears? Had he heard her praying? Had he been awake? How long had he been awake? Why had he not said something earlier?

The icy emotion of her fear exploded in a heat of rage. How could he have let her experience that terror by herself for so long? Why couldn't he have let her know earlier that she was not alone, that he could have popped up at any moment and defended her? It was not anywhere near fair or right. Her breath that she had held for so long now started coming in short, panting sobs while hot tears burst from her eyes. She clenched her jaw and bit her lips alternately. But even as she raged, she felt him whisper once more in her ear, "Wait."

## The Sword of the Lord, and Gideon Judges 7:20

Andreas, Ezra, and Shem crouched together at the end of the ridge. Their head swiveled to take in every side of their surroundings and then locked together in a stare that lasted four or five heartbeats. Shem's eyes were blinking fast. He was ready. Ezra's jaw was clenched with lips pressed together in a great frown. He was ready as well. Andreas gave a quick nod and pointed to the lamp hidden in Shem's robe. While Shem pulled it out, the other two huddled close in front of him to block any sight of the flames from being seen. Shem held the lamp out to Ezra's proffered torch, and tipped the vessel just ever so carefully so just a bit of oil would seep past the wick, catch fire, and dribble onto the torch. As soon as Ezra's torch began to flicker to life, he pulled it away from Shem and poked it toward Andreas's waiting torch, while Shem repeated the previous operation on his own torch.

A few seconds later, when their torches looked reliably lit, with a single motion all three jumped to their various full height, turned their backs to each other, raised their torches high into the air, and bellowed with all their might. "*Adonai gadol*," shouted Andreas: God is great. Ezra's voice was an inarticulate roar that sounded more like a bull than human. Shem let out a stream of the foulest language either of the others had ever heard. But before any of them could draw breath to continue their sonic assault, they were silenced by a sudden, piercing scream directly beneath them in the depression. It was followed by another shriek of terror from further off to the west, and a counterpoint barking of curses just to the south of them.

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Basha's held breath was beginning to burn inside him as he waited for Shar's signal. But without warning, a blazing light sprang up to his left. It was so close, so bright! Then the confused roar of shouting assaulted his ears. Basha continued to hold his breath, but his innards felt like they were going to explode from within him. Then the sudden shriek went up, so piercing and so loud. It caused his own breath to burst from him, and he was terrified to hear a shriek coming from his own throat



and feel the loss of control in his bowels and bladder. Before he knew what was happening, Basha found himself dashing away from the light and confusion, dribbling and sobbing as he went. He ran back up the hill but tripped when the talus gave way beneath his scrambling feet, and fell headlong into a patch of goat grass. His face smashed forcefully into the ground, causing a sudden, searing pain before all went dark and he passed out.

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It took Ezra only three strides to pound down the steep incline toward the cursing coming from the darkness in front of him. But even as he hit the bottom of the incline, he saw a man emerging from the shadows holding a glittering dagger in a clenched fist just over his shoulder. He was built just as stoutly as Ezra, if a bit shorter. This would not be a quick fight.

Without thought, Ezra jerked the torch in his left hand and sent it flying toward his assailant, who deftly ducked and rolled heels over head, and rose up to squarely meet Ezra with knife pointed straight at his chest. But Ezra had taken his staff in both hands and thrust it out in front of him, raising it as he made contact with his assailant. He had hoped to catch the man under his chin, but again he had dodged the main blow and allowed Ezra to bullrush past him. Ezra felt the steel of the dagger along his right flank, but it had not pierced his thick tunic. He planted his left foot firmly in the ground in front of him, bent his knee, and pushed his right leg back toward where the robber had been, gripping the staff in his right hand and swinging it in a downward arc as his body turned to deliver a blow to the other's legs. The robber, who had regained his balance, was closing in behind him with the dagger held high. He had already extended his legs to reach maximum height and so could not jump a sufficient height to avoid the staff coming at his ankles. He came down hard on hips and elbows and immediately rolled to his left to avoid the next crash of the staff, but he picked the wrong direction. Ezra, fully turned around, grabbed the staff with his left hand a few hands' breadth below his right hand, pushed the iron base of the staff out toward the robber, and brought it down squarely on his exposed right temple. Ezra watched as the robber continued to roll on to his back and watched as his left hand

curled into his chest while his right hand stretched out as if to ward off another blow. The dagger flew from his hand as the man's body came to rest on its right shoulder, right arm still extended, and eyes wide open, and a black pool of blood slowly spreading in the dust. Ezra stood over him, his breath stuttering as he inhaled deeply and tried to calm himself. After a few breaths, he knelt and twisted the man's head to view the wound. It was deep and fatal. He put a few fingers in front of the man's nostrils. There was no breath.

## Lean Not unto Thine Own Understanding

Proverbs 3:5-6

Shueh held her as tightly as he could around the waist while her shrieks turned into violent, uncontrollable sobs. His body's position was unbalanced and uncomfortable, bent at the waist with nowhere to stretch his legs, but she needed to be held. Not restrained. Just held so she could feel protected. As he tried to comfort her, he heard the struggle between two powerful men not far off to his left, which ended in a sharp crack and low thud. The robber to his right had fled at the terrible ruckus from the hilltop, but had been pursued by a torch bearing figure halfway back up the hill, where it stopped and bobbed about. But from the hilltop he watched as another torch came slowly toward them. Its glow lit an honest and concerned face, displaying no hint of menace. He looked up at the torch bearer and cautiously said "Greetings," in a hesitant voice. "It appears you have done us a great service. I am deeply indebted to you."

The man with the torch brought it down lower to inspect the faces of the couple on the ground. A soft smile flickered at the edge of his lips. "Shueh? Miri? Is that you?"

"*Blessed be the Lord,*" escaped Shueh's lips as tears welled suddenly to his eyes. "Yes. I am Yeshueh ben Yousef miBeit Yehouda of Natzrat. he said, introducing himself properly. As he said this, he pulled his feet under him and helped his wife to rise, noting that she was holding her breath and stifling her sobs. "Did Yoni send you?"

Andreas sighed in relief, muttered a short "yes," and then got back to the business of securing his charges. "Ezra?" he barked, turning to the massive man who was just coming into the torchlight from the direction of the mighty struggle.

"One man. He is no longer a threat," he replied tersely, and then plopped his bulk onto the ground and said nothing more.

They both then looked past the trembling couple to where Shem's torchlight still dipped and wavered in the distance. Andreas called out loudly, "Shem, what news?"

An indistinct call and a wave of torch came back from Shem, with only the word "a moment" being distinguished, but his tone

was cool and even. Andreas looked at Ezra to assist, but Ezra only shook his head and sat silently.

Andreas turned back toward the couple. "Yes, Yoni has been expecting you all day. When you did not come, he lit the signal fire for you. He sent us out just in case you were unable to make your own way there. Is there a reason you did not come to the river with the others?" His tone betrayed impatience and aggravation. "Were you hurt or sick?"

Miri lashed out in a reply full of vinegar, "Hold your tongue. You may not speak to me that way. There are things worse than injury or illness, things your feeble brain cannot even think of."

Andreas was taken aback and noted that even Shueh's eyes belied surprise at her quick attack. "Excuse me, woman," he quickly interjected. "No, I do not know the exact cause of your delay. I know only that it has caused me and mine some distress to find and secure you, and we have yet to get you back to safety."

"You and yours before any others," Miri snorted. "That's the way it always has been, eh, Andreas ben Yona? The biggest house, the longest boat..."

Andreas was even more stunned when she said his name. He had not introduced himself yet. How did she know who he was? Then, as she described his family's house and the boats in the family fishing business, he recognized the voice, and then stooped forward to shine a light on the familiar face. It was stained with dust and tears and was half hidden by loose locks of hair, but he knew it. "Miri of Migdal Nunayya!" His mouth fell open and he slowly shook his head. "*You're* that Miri? If I'd known it was you, I'd have..." his voice trailed off as he tried to think of an appropriate action.

Shueh waved his left hand slightly to attract attention. "Hello, can someone fill me in on what is going on here?"

Miri turned to him and said in a voice no less edgy, "Shueh, this is Andreas of Kfar Nahum, Shimon's older brother. He wasn't home very often, so you may not have met him before he left for the big city. He used to sell his sardines to my uncle Mordecai's *garum* factory. He always demanded a high price. Much too important for us."

Shueh let these revelations roll over him: an armed search party sent by Yoni that had somehow managed to come upon them at exactly the right time in the right place, and one of them was not only known by his wife, but could be the foil on which she redirected her helpless anger instead of on himself. What were the chances of this having been a random event? Not only were the chances extremely thin, and not only had it been what he had dared hope it might be, but it had turned out even better than he could have imagined. A few moments ago, his life had been in deadly peril. Even worse, he smiled to himself, his marriage had been in perhaps worse peril. Now everything was solved, just as he had felt. The heat of the *caldarium* had suffused through his body, and now he was splayed out in the waters of the *frigidarium*, completely enervated and blissfully happy. He smiled as he was drawn back into the last remaining conflict.

“I’m truly sorry I did not know it was you, Miri,” Andreas stammered. “I,” he paused, rethought his words, then said, “You are well though, are you not?”

“She will forgive you soon enough, Andreas. She is really madder at me than she is at you, you’re just being caught in the general blast,” Shueh reassured Andreas. Then, turning to Miri he said softly, “He was just calling it as he saw it. No honeyed tongue perhaps, but also no viper’s venom. Andreas is an honest and concerned man.” She looked up at him, muttered something at him from between clenched teeth, and plopped herself down on a blanket, which she began to smooth and arrange.

They all fell silent, wondering at the events of the past moments. But the silence was soon broken by the sound of grumbling, many footsteps, and a bit of groaning. Shem was returning with a pitiful figure in tow. His face was bloody, and his clothing soiled both from within and without. His hands were bound behind his back, and Shem had a pincer hold on the man’s ear. “This guy says there were only two of them,” Shem reported as they approached. Shem forced the man to the ground. The man instantly started to squirm and plead in incoherent discomfort.

When Shueh saw both the man’s discomfort and Shem’s shortness of temper, he quickly stepped over to come between

Shem's foot and the man's side. Then he reached down and helped the man up, moved him a pace to the left, and set him back down again. The man immediately fell silent. "You set him right on top of our fire pit," Shueh explained to the befuddled Shem. "As I understand the law, the robber is to be stoned, not burned."

Andreas stepped forward to interrogate the man. "What is your name?" he asked. "Where are you from?"

The man's frantic gaze flitted back and forth between the men standing above him. He opened his mouth to speak, then shut it again. After he reconsidered, he said haltingly, "I am," he paused, then went on. "Marcus from Italia," he lied. "Markus Lepididos, and...and...you can't touch me."

"Well, Marcus Lepid...Lepiduous? Is that what you said?" Andreas laughed at him. "Your Selan accent tells me you're from a little closer to home than Italia, and a real *romi* would know not to pronounce his own made-up surname in *Goy*."

"But I didn't *do* anything to anyone. I was just out here in the night, trying to innocently scare up a meal of jerboas, and then, boom, you guys show up and start chasing me," he lied again. "You can't stone me for that. As a matter of fact, I should report *you*. My father's brother, *dod* Avram, yeah, *dod* Avram. He's a...a big scribe in...in Yericho. He'll have you fined and strapped before you know it," he spat in pretended anger.

"I said the *gannab* is to be stoned, and you have not yet been proved a robber. We can indeed prove nothing but that your own mother would not be proud of you at this moment," Shueh chuckled, "much less your supposed Uncle Avram. What is to become of him, Andreas?"

At that moment Ezra coughed from a few paces away. "Andreas, a word, please."

"What, Ezra?" questioned Andreas, a little impatiently again. "Come over here and tell me. What of the other man?"

"I am unable to come closer," muttered Ezra. "The other man...the other man is dead. You know what that means."

"Shar!" exclaimed the bound man, then fell immediately silent. Miri winced visibly on her blanket, and the other three men each registered the news with a grimace or shake of the head.

“Ah, you *do* know him,” Andreas accused the captive. “And we know he is a thief and a murderer, else he would not be dead at Ezra’s righteous, but now unclean hands. And so, you too are *gannab*.”

The bound man squirmed on the ground and began to beg for his life. But apart from Shem who looked anxiously between each of the other three men, no one made any moves against him.

Shueh knelt and touched Miri on the shoulder. “You have been the most affected in this matter. What do you say?”

She quickly raised her eyes and glared at the bound and stinking mess a pace or two from her for a good ten heartbeats. Then she spat, bowed her head, and said, “No, not here. Not now.”

The night wind sighed as the group fell silent. The howl of a wild dog calling out to his mate floated down from the western hills. Shem traced a few circles in the dust with his toes, and a few snuffles came up from Miri’s blanket.

At last, Andreas cleared his throat. “What do we do with the other robber, Ezra?” he asked.

“*And this people was carrion, for food*,” Shueh speaking the grim sentence upon the corpse. “And the carcasses of this people will be food for the birds of the sky and the beasts of the earth. No one will be afraid of them.”

“Amin,” muttered all the rest. Miri arose and began folding her blanket while Shueh gathered their other belongings and stuffed them in his bag. Shem kicked out the remaining embers of the fire while Ezra went to retrieve his own sputtering torch and extinguish the few grasses that were smoldering from its flame. Andreas reached behind the sitting captive and helped him to his feet. “Do you have another name you’d like us to call you, Marcus?”

“Basha,” the man answered miserably from an upturned, tear stained face. “Have mercy on me, I was just hungry and looking for something to eat.”

“One doesn’t usually request a meal from sleeping campers with this,” spat Shem, flipping Basha’s *khinjar* in the air.

“Shem, would you be so kind as to get this man back to the river with us, alive?” Andreas said sternly.

“Let the filthy and the unclean go together,” retorted Shem, sniffing at Basha’s soiled clothing.

“Many thanks,” grumbled Ezra from behind them, stepping up to envelop Basha’s tied hands in his massive clutch. “I’ll be sure to return the favor.”

As they all began to move toward the road, Shueh let go of Miri’s hand and started in the direction of the dead robber.

“Where are you going, *ba’ali*?” she asked through her sniffles. “The road is this way.”

“I will catch you up in a bit,” he said as he stepped into the darkness. After realizing he could not make out any detail on the ground before him. He closed his eyes and recited *And they will bring you a red, innocent heifer that has no blemish...He that touches the dead, even any man's dead body, shall be unclean for seven days.* With this reminder not to touch the body, and the ability of his eyes to see in the darkness, he opened his eyes and almost immediately saw the smudge of the fallen man a few paces to his right.

Like most people he knew, while he had seen many dead bodies, he had never ventured near to touch one. It just wasn’t done, except by close family or the already unclean. When his own father had died, he was away at work and never had anything to do with the body before it was buried. He was therefore hesitant to approach the body, but something inside him was driving him to it.

“If I hadn’t been camped out here on the valley floor, these men would not have been tempted to come out to rob me,” he thought. “If I had been at Yoni’s already, Ezra would not have had to defend himself.” He repeated these thoughts to himself over and over, with ever more concern and pain showing itself on his face. “It is *my* fault that this man is dead.”

He knelt close by the man’s shoulder, not daring to touch him or even look too closely at the bloody wound on his forehead. He noticed about the man’s neck a large silver pendant. He knew right away this was not the man’s possession; it was too feminine. But it was of good craftsmanship. It would do no good to let it be buried in the dust by whatever creature devoured the carcass, and perhaps the original owner could be found in either Beth-Abara or Yericho. Gingerly, without



touching his flesh, he lifted the pendant from the man's neck, grasped it between thumb and two fingers, and gave a sharp pull. It came free easily, and he tucked it into the pouch at his waist. It was such a waste for a man like this to die in the act of such grievous sin. "Adonai," he whispered aloud. "If it were somehow possible, I wish this man could still be alive. Yes, the life he led was probably not the best, but if it weren't for me and my silly doubts, he would still be alive. He might have made something of himself someday."

He sat in silence for a few moments more, his bowels unsettled and wracked by guilt. How could he just leave this man's body as prey to wild beasts, this man he had had a hand in killing? He raised his hands from his knees and stretched them in front of his face, jamming his eyes closed in despair. Then, as if in a dream, he opened his eyes to see his hands slowly rotating inwards and downwards, coming ever closer to the corpse's bashed-in head. His mind reeled as he tried to command his hands not to touch the body. It would make him ritually unclean. Proximity would have to suffice. With his fingertips hovering ever so slightly above the dead man's head, he heard himself say, "*Ani omer lech, kom.*"

But the man didn't stand up. He didn't revive. He didn't stir. He didn't breathe. Why did he think he could do this? What gave him the audacity to think that he could heal another person? Where did this thought come from? Embarrassed even in the solitary darkness of the night, he brought his hands to his face to hide his shame from himself. Slowly, he rubbed his eyes and brows until he realized his hands had almost touched a corpse. Startled, he pulled them away from the robber, planted them on the ground, and heaved himself to his feet. With one horrified look back at the prone robber, he turned and fled toward the receding torches on the road to Yardan.

Ahead, the signal fire danced brightly and invitingly as *keshet* the goat rose over the edge of the eastern hills. Behind him, a pair of owls, who had already sensed the smell of death, were moving swiftly to investigate a dark, unmoving smudge on the ground.

## And the Israelites Passed Over on Dry Ground Joshua 3:17

Yoni had watched far into the night. He had seen his search party go out and cross the river. He had grumbled when they had doused their torches and then strained his eyes and ears for any report. *Kimah* was directly overhead, outshining most other stars, but the moon had set long ago, and no planets wandered among the stars at this hour. For a brief moment, he thought he caught the sight of a torch glowing in the distance, halfway up the road to Yericho, but it soon disappeared. He began to fear, not only for Shueh, but also for Andreas and his companions. Behind him, Shem-du and Chaim fed the bonfire, but the fuel supply was quickly nearing its end. Chaim had given up asking Yoni “what news, *rav*?” after several terse rebuffs. Now only the crackle and hiss of the fire could be heard, as all three gathered on the rise to gaze into the night.

Chaim was the first to spot a torch winking into existence. Shem-du saw it and reported a second torch diverging from the first. By the time Yoni had located the lights, there were three of them bobbing along, but they quickly fused into a single oscillating blob. A few minutes more, and they began to string out again, heading north-east, before running together again. They were on the final stretch of the road and would be back in a quarter watch. Yoni smiled, grasped Chaim by the shoulder and laughed, and then told them both to scurry off and prepare some food and drink for the wanderers. “And a place to sleep,” he called after them as they disappeared past the fire. Finally, Shueh would arrive, and the preparations could begin.

Yoni descended to the riverbank, where he found the ferry cord tied to its post. He heaved at the cord several times to break the ferry loose from its mooring on the other side of the river where Andreas had left it. It finally broke loose and came sliding along its guideline toward him. He jumped onto it and immediately began pulling the other cord to return to the western shore. He made the boat fast in its mooring and then paced up the steep incline to where the road met the valley floor and sat himself on the bench in front of the toll booth. After dutifully

fishing a *lepta* from his pouch and placing it in the ceramic dish at the end of the bench, he tried to focus his eyes up the road. He could just now make out the diverging light of the torches and make out the party illuminated beneath them. He could make out three torch bearers and a very short figure clasped to one of them; that would be Miri and Shueh. He had heard Shueh's pet name for her was "dwarf," and now he could see why. But there were only two other men under the torches. Where was his third rescuer? He squinted his eyes to get them to focus better, and then in the shadows he made out another man. No, not just one man. There were two. Did Shueh have another person in his party? And why did they not all gather under the torchlight? Yes, one of the two men in half-darkness was Ezra, but he seemed to be leading the last man, a much smaller figure, behind him by a rope. Yoni shook his head. What was going on? Who was this other man?

When the group was some twenty paces distant, Yoni rose up and bellowed "Shalom Andreas. What news?" He saw the small figure of the woman clutch suddenly at her husband, and both pulled up short.

"Shalom *rav*," came the answering call. "We return with the fish you sent us out to fetch." Shueh freed himself from the clutch of his wife and pulled her forward as Andreas advanced toward Yoni. Andreas, stopping when the torchlight fell on Yoni, turned and gestured toward the slowly advancing couple. "*Rav* Yochanan, may I present to you Shueh bar Yousef miBeit Yehouda of Natzrat with his wife Miryam bat Tzedek miBeit Zevulun of Migdal Nunayya." Then, turning and bowing slightly, he continued "Shueh, Miri, allow me to present the esteemed *Rav* Yochanan bar Zekharyah miBeit Levee of Yerushalayim."

Shueh stepped forward and regarded his cousin for several heartbeats, the boy who had become the great and fabled *rav* of the river. Then he practically tackled him in a massive embrace. Both broke out into laughter as they thumped each other's backs vigorously. "There are no words to express my heart," Shueh finally managed to say as he pushed back from Yoni and held both his shoulders in his hands. "Suffice it to say, thanks to you, I have come, safe and sound."

Yoni nodded solemnly, then brushed his hands from his shoulders and pushed him out of the way and raised his hands as if he were a blind man feeling his way. "But where is your wife, Shueh? Where is the lovely and virtuous Miri? Did you not bring her with you?"

"Watch it, Yoni," Shueh hissed from the corner of his mouth. "She has a wicked kick. It'll take your shins right out."

Yoni chuckled, lowered his hands, and looked down on the defiant face of Miri, standing with fists planted on her hips, a petulant lip, and a single raised eyebrow. "Yeah, I know, I'm so short you can't see me," she retorted with a smirk.

"It is simply that Adonai spent so much time on your lovely face that he forgot to give you any legs," Yoni soothed as he embraced her warmly but gently.

Miri broke out in a sobbing laugh as tears spouted from her eyes. She mumbled something incoherent into his arms and hugged him back with all her might.

Yoni then raised his glance to Andreas and Shem, raising an eyebrow and cocking his head in the direction of Ezra and his unknown companion. He saw then that the last man's hands were bound behind him, his clothes soiled and disheveled, and his face dirty and grim. The man was obviously a captive, and not a guest. "I take it you had a bit of trouble out there?" he asked Andreas.

"Two robbers. We got there just before they attacked," Andreas reported tersely. "One of them didn't make it."

Yoni bowed his head and shook it slowly. "By Ezra's hand, I take it?" he asked.

"Yes, he'll have to stay outside the town for now," said Andreas. "Is there a place we can put him and the *gannab* for now?"

Yoni sighed and looked sadly at Ezra. "I am sorry, Ezra. We will get you taken care of tomorrow," Turning his attention to the stranger, he said in a stern voice, "And you, my wretched man, will be in Ezra's keeping until then. I need not remind you what he did to your companion?"

The man lowered his head even further in acknowledgment as Ezra heaved a deep sigh. "But you will receive food and drink in a little while. I imagine you will both want to bathe before

doing so," he suggested. "Take him to the poolside after we cross, Ezra. I'll send Chaim back with some vittles and towels."

With that settled, Ezra and his charge were left in darkness as the others headed off toward the ferry. Hearing snores coming from the tollbooth, Yoni said "I guess Reuben is down for the night." He fumbled at his waist and pulled some clinking coins from his pouch. "That's three *assarion*," he said. "covering both my coming over here and five of us going back." He let them clink loudly into the dish on the tollbooth's dish. Then they all climbed down the incline to board the ferry. Shueh was the last one to board the boat

"There are no waves, *ba'ali*," Miri assured him as she reached out a hand to him. "He gets seasick very easily," she commented to Yoni.

"No, I'm certain there are not," Shueh said bleakly as he still stood on the bank, not moving. In his mind he was facing the very last obstacle on the road. If he chose to step on the boat and cross the river, he would be stepping into the realm hinted at by his mother all those years ago. He would be crossing Yardan with Yoni.

Yoni, coming back from the other side of the boat, looked down on his cousin's bewilderment on the bank. "You can do it, my brother," he said softly. "Come, take my hand."

Shueh blinked, slowly looked up, and saw Yoni's outstretched hand. He blinked again, sighed, and then reached out to take it. Yoni quickly pulled him onto the ferry. "Cast off," he called in a loud voice. "Next stop, the promised land!"

"But I thought the promised land was over there," Miri said with quizzical eyes, pointing back over her shoulder. "Over Yardan."

"That's where we're going, my daughter, over Yardan," said Yoni with great satisfaction as he and Andreas heaved on the cable. "It seems no matter what direction you're headed, you always have to go over Yardan to get to the good side."

# Chapter 7

## Author's Notes

Wadi al-Kharrar, the stream that once fed the community of Beth-Abara, runs a little over a mile and half from where it empties into the Jordan River up to the base of Elijah's Hill. Over that mile and a half, one rises almost 2,000 feet, resulting in a 23% grade, a very strenuous hike. This hill has been held from antiquity to be the place where Elijah was caught up to heaven on the fiery chariot. Today the site is marked by ruins of a Byzantine church complex dating back to the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries CE.

The vegetation growing wild in the *wadi* includes varieties such as *eshnan*, a rosemary bush, (*seidlitzia rosmarinus*); *yanbut*, a field mesquite tree (*prosopis farcta*); and *haga*, the camelthorn bush, (*alhagi maurorum*). Cultivated crops included dates, figs, barley, and *kaneh-bosm*, a variety of hemp used to make rope, as well as folk medicinal concoctions.

In Jerusalem, some thirty feet under current street level, archaeologists have recently discovered a broad, stepped road leading from the Pool of Siloam straight up to the Temple Mount. They have named it the Pilgrimage Way, as the thousands of religious visitors to the ancient city might have made the Pool of Siloam their first stop in order to purify themselves before going up to the temple. The street was bordered by shops and had its own sophisticated drainage sewer, all of which can be visited today. Since there is no spring on the Temple Mount itself, and much water was wanted for purification in that venue as well, water would have to have been carried up the pilgrimage way by temple workers in large pitchers called *khadim*. The road is about 2,000 feet long and rises 379 feet, a resulting 20% grade, slightly less than a staircase, but much more than a wheelchair ramp.

Characters introduced in this chapter include the following. Characters with an asterisk are based on historical people.

- \*Aharon, Aaron, the brother of Moses
- \*Chanokh, Enoch the Prophet
- \*Gavriel, the Angel Gabriel
- Hadas, Matan's wife
- Matan, a date farmer and the magistrate of Beth-Abara
- Uzi of Beth-Abara, hemp farmer and medicine man

Place names in this chapter include the following with their corresponding modern names.

- Brechat HaShiloah = Pool of Siloam
- Har Nevo = Mount Nebo

## For Thy Maker is Thine Husband Isaiah 54:5

“I know why you have to do it, but it seems odd to have to trudge all the way up here to fetch the water when you’re right next to a river to begin with,” Miri said through panting breaths as she knelt to fill her pitcher at the basin under the spring.

“Oh, I know it. All seven hundred and forty something steps up, and seven hundred and forty something steps back. At least we’re headed downslope when the vessels are full,” moaned Salome as she bent back at the waist with her hands pressing in at her hips. “You probably didn’t see the river waters as you crossed over last night. They are nothing like the clear waters that flow out of Gennesaret. As soon as Yordan meets up with the Yarmouk River, it becomes a brown mass of dirt and sand from the Syrian desert.” She finished stretching, heaved her own pitcher up to her hip, and turned to descend the path back to the river. “You could settle and strain that water for a week, and it wouldn’t get any cleaner.”

Miri hoisted the jug that had been loaned to her and followed Salome down the slope, sloshing a bit of water on her as she navigated the unfamiliar path. “You’re right, though. I did not get a good look at the river water last night. I’ll admit, there were a few other things on my mind.”

“I can’t even imagine what that must have been like,” Salome tutted as she picked up the pace. “Robbers and knives and torches and death and all. I don’t know how you coped with it.”

“Truth to tell, I broke down a little,” Miri admitted sheepishly. “Poor Shueh’s ears must still be ringing from all my shrieking.”

“I’d have been right there with you, sister,” Salome chimed in. “But what I don’t get is exactly why you were out there to begin with. Chaim hinted at some stuff he heard from Andreas, and little Ram said a few things from a long conversation he had with Yoni, but I can’t quite piece it all together. I mean, why come all that way and then stop at the last *mil*?”

“Which version of the story do you want? Sounds like you already got the male ‘did this because of that to fix the other



thing' version," replied Miri, puffing out her cheeks and grunting her impression of men speaking.

"Yeah, we've got six hundred and eighty something steps to go, so give me the real version," Salome laughed. "And don't leave out the kissing parts."

The morning breeze flowed from behind their backs, spreading the scent of *eshnan* and *yanbut*. A few butterflies hovered among the *haga* blossoms while sparrows flitted from bush to bush. The tops of the cliffs that shadowed them from the morning sun glowed white, while in the valley below was shrouded in morning mist. Compared to the darkness and terror of the night before, Miri felt like she had stepped into another world, and felt as carefree as the butterflies or the birds.

"It all started right before we got married," Miri explained. "Shueh's mother took me aside and told me some very interesting things about him."

"Such as?" Salome interrupted.

"Well, they had to do with some very difficult things about Shueh's heritage," she hesitated to go into the whole discussion about his paternity or conception. "But the main thing was that someday, all these difficulties would come to some sort of head, and at that time I was to give him a message."

"Sounds mysterious," Salome replied with piqued interest. "A mysterious, rich uncle, maybe? A rich plot of land somewhere?"

"Oh, that would be much easier to deal with, that's for sure," Miri admitted, nodding her head. "But no, it was actually this journey." She paused for a moment, listening to the sound of the water sloshing in her pitcher and the crunch of their feet on the path. "When the day came that he absolutely had to find the answer to his deepest, most troubling question, I was to tell him that 'He will find the answer with his cousin Yochanan who lives on the other side of Yordan.' Why she couldn't tell him, I don't know exactly. But I'm guessing that his mother thought that one, I'd be nearer him when the crisis came, and two, that it would sound better coming from me for some reason."

"I'll buy at least reason number two. I seem to have a certain power over Chaim that his mother never did," she smirked knowingly back at Miri.

“Anyway, I thought the time had arrived when Yousef died suddenly, about four years ago. Shueh had been working down in Zippori, and didn’t get home until the next day; after the burial of course.” Miri screwed herself up to reveal the family secret. “He went to the tomb to grieve, but on his way back he met a small group of people who mocked him for his grief.”

“What?” Salome stopped for a moment, set down her pitcher, and stared at Miri. “Why would they do that?”

“The town is convinced that Yousef was not actually Shueh’s father, that he was...” Miri’s voice trailed off.

“And his mother had never let him know?” asked Salome quietly.

“Well, it’s complicated,” she stammered. “I think that might be the reason she wanted Shueh to go to Yoni. You know, still family, but somewhat separated.”

Salome, perceptive enough not to pursue the topic further, tried turning it on its head. “Some people! Just because they come from proper homes and long pedigrees, think they can lord it over those less fortunate. I’d like to know how many of those people are in the same boat themselves.” She picked up her pitcher in a huff and set off down the path again.

Miri followed, and after a few moments of silence, she picked the tale back up. “Anyway, he was pretty messed up from the encounter. He sat in Yousef’s workshop for hours, not saying anything. It wasn’t near as bad of course, but it was a little like when I had lost my unborn child a few years before that. I was down for weeks. Nothing could cheer me up, until he touched me and said some very kind words in a way he had not said before. It was as if I had been healed by his words. So, I decided that since he was just about as grieved as I had been, that I would try the same with him.”

She switched the pitcher to her other hip and slowed her walk, which was matched by Salome who had nothing to say at this point.

“I told him that I had known of his questionable parentage since before we had been married,” Miri explained, “that his mother had tried to explain it to me, but that in the end, she had given me a secret charge. I touched his face and head and said, ‘Your mother says, when you need the answer, you’ll find it with

your cousin Yochanan over Yordan.’ He seemed startled but said nothing. But when I called him for dinner that night, he actually came, and ate a mountain of food as well.”

They had reached the village by this time, but continued in low voices as they smiled and bobbed their heads to the others who they met on the street. She related his two abortive attempts to come here earlier, the latter of which had introduced him to spending the night out on the valley floor. When they arrived at Salome’s home, they emptied their jars into the water basin. Salome retrieved some bread and cheese from the larder, and they both sat down on a bench overlooking her kitchen garden.

“Well, now you’re here. Shueh can get his answer, and you two can get on with your life?” Salome queried hopefully.

“It would be nice, but depending on the answer, there may be no going back,” Miri said, resting her cheek on the heel of her hand as she chewed some cheese. Salome waited again for the rest of the story. “He’s convinced he is destined for something special. Maybe a prophet or something. I mean, honestly, I think he’s worried something will happen to him, like...like being told he must go marry some shadowy woman like Husha had to do with Gomer. I don’t know. If I were smart, maybe I’d just ignore it until it passes. But when I remember what his mother told me about him, I wonder if he’s right. I even wonder if he’s selling himself short.”

“Short? Becoming a prophet? It’s been half a millennium since we had a prophet, girl. It would be hard to top that,” Salome said, a little too loudly at first. Then she paused, looked attentively in the direction of her beans for several heartbeats, then slowly turned to Miri and met her waiting gaze. Slowly Salome’s mouth opened to form the single word: “*Mashiach?*”

Miri’s face contorted into an expression of abject sorrow as she bit both lips and tears sprung from her eyes. She gave two tiny, short nods, and then buried her face in her hands. Salome put down her food, hitched herself over to sit next to Miri, and surrounded her in her arms. Miryam buried her face in Salome’s breast. Salome shushed her, reached under her head covering and petted her hair, and cocked her head up to the sky. After a long silence, Salome said “Well, Yochanan is the next best thing to a prophet himself, they say. As a matter of fact, he’s been going on

about the coming of a *Mashiach*, but I always figured it would be some hero with a sword, not..." She trailed off. More silence as Miri's sobs subsided and she turned her head to dry her eyes. "But if anyone has the answers for your poor Shueh, it would be our Yoni."

## The Valley of the Shadow of Death Psalms 23:4

The pain was excruciating. It felt like the sun had descended at noonday and flown inside his head, only to explode. He tried for the briefest of moments to hold his head together, not let the explosion send his brains into the far reaches of the universe, but the pain was too much. With something like a snap, he was gone.

He. Who was he? What was he? He could not remember. He was a stone in the river. The river was rushing toward him. The waters built up and overtopped him. They roared past him, or was he roaring up the river and diving deep into it? But the river was not water. It was thick, like water, but it did not cling to him. It was not water at all. It was light. But no matter how much he was surrounded by the light, he himself was a black solid mass. The light surrounded him and somehow warmed him, but it could not touch him. Then parts of the light began to resolve into pictures. A soft face and warm hands: his mother! A stronger set of hands as if on his shoulders: his father! Wait, he had shoulders? Suddenly he became aware of who he was. He was Shar. A host of memories of his life swirled around him, stretching on into eternity, but as brief as a puff of a dried flower. Then the lights began to dim. He was falling, falling, falling fast, falling forever. Would it never stop? He tried to move his arms. He did not have arms. He tried to open his mouth and yell for help. But he had no mouth. Whatever he was, whatever parts were his, they were bound in a solid sheath of unyielding steel. He would fall forever, unable to move or speak.

Then he heard something, something besides the eternal roaring of space as it rushed past him. "I wish this man could still be alive." Oh yes, he wanted to be alive. Was he dead? Is that what this was? He suddenly remembered the big man bringing his staff down on him. The dark mass of the stick filled his entire vision. He tried to pull back from it, but it drove on into him and flattened him into nothing. He was filled again by the empty roar of silence.

But then the voice again. It was not his. He had never heard it before. But it was a voice. It was alive. He reached out with every fiber of his being to try to hear the words. "Yes, the life he led was probably not the best." No! No, he then shrieked in a

voiceless wail that echoed ceaselessly in his ears. No, he was far from the best. He was a wretch. He was mud. He was no better than dung. He had killed! He had ripped out the life of his Yara. No, not Yara. She should be alive. He should be dead. But he was dead. He was on his way to be burned, to be burned forever. The rushing pit suddenly filled with images of Yara, or Aryan, and of every other person he had killed or harmed. They opened their mouths at him. They shouted and screamed. He desperately tried to stop his ears, but he could not move anything.

Once more, however, the voice came again. Like thick, sweet cream it covered the leering faces. It sounded like honey tasted. It wrapped him in a thick, plush, soft blanket of warmth. "He might have made something of himself someday." Yes! Yes, I can! I can make something of myself. I can change. I can be good. I can do good things. I can make Basha not kill. I can leave the people alone. I can go home. Please let me go home. Please take me back. Please, let me be somebody, something again.

Finally, in a voice that pulled the exploding sun from his head, a voice that caught him in mid fall, a voice that calmed the rushing waters of light and made them a cool pool of stars, a voice that made him see again, he heard the words, "I say to thee, arise."

He looked down. He saw himself on the ground. He saw the gore that had once been his forehead. He felt he was gently descending, falling into his own self. But before he was ushered back within his body, he saw the face of the one who spoke. The face. He had never seen such a face before. He knew this face in every detail. He yearned to reach out and touch the face. The eyes. They were so bright. They knew him. They knew what he had done. Yet they do not judge him. They do not hate him for what he had done. Those eyes. He could fall into them for eternity and be ever happy. They are...they are...he could come up with no word, no thought, no concept to describe what those eyes contained. At last, all he could think was that those eyes were home.

But the eyes looked away. They stood up and walked away, and as they did, he felt his bowels burst in yearning. Come back! Come back to me. Don't leave me. Don't you ever leave me.

Come back. Come back and be with me. Come look at me again. His own voice faded and echoed, but not into a rush of sights and sounds, and not into blackness, but into nothing.

An eternity later, he awoke. He really awoke. Him. He breathed. He smelt goat droppings and the cold ashes of a fire. He moved his tongue in his mouth. It tasted of blood and dirt. He wrestled mightily to open his eyes. He reached out with his hand to help peel his eyes open. His hands moved. When his eyelids finally opened, he saw the spangled night sky stretching to infinity above him. He also saw the shadow of a large bird hopping into his peripheral vision. He started. His whole body instantly responded, and before he knew it, he was on his feet listening to the terrified screech of the owl as it fled. The screech in turn terrified him, and he found himself suddenly on his feet, crouched as if waiting for an attack. The glint of his *khinjar* on the ground just a pace distant caught his eye. Instinctively he reached for it and slid it into its accustomed place at his waist. But no one came. Just silence.

He gingerly brought his outstretched fingertips to his forehead. Unwilling to touch the gore he had thought he had seen before, he hesitated. But there seemed to be no pain. Gathering up the courage, he lightly tapped his finger on his head. No pain. No blood. No bones. Ever so lightly he dragged his fingertip back to his ear, up to the peak of his forehead, and back down to his brow. There was no wound. Nothing at all. Just his hair. A bit dirty and out of order, but he was perfectly intact. He looked down at his feet. By the dim starlight he could see a deep, black stain where his head had been. He bent his knees and tentatively reached his fingers to feel the stain. It was cold and sticky. It was blood. It was his blood. Now he grabbed his entire head with his hands, patting and feeling for any sign of hurt. How could this be if there was blood on the ground?

Then he remembered the voice. He remembered the words. He remembered the face, the eyes. Somehow this man had reached into eternity, found him falling into the abyss, dragged him back, and made him whole. How could this be? As he stood shaking his head in disbelief with slack jawed amazement, he realized that the man who owned that voice, that face, those eyes, those powerful and wonderful hands, had just walked

away. Which direction had he gone? He replayed the vision from his memory, saw where his body had been lying, and then worked out that the man had headed east, up the rise, and down the road. He was headed toward the river.

I must go. I must find him. I must catch him up before he leaves. He scrambled up the rise and found the road, looking to his right to spot anything moving on it. But when I find him, what shall I say? He turned and began to walk down the road. What can I say? What can you say to such a powerful and wonderful person? Then he began to run, and it came to him what he should say.



## Unto the Door of the Tabernacle of the Congregation Exodus 40:12

Yoni awoke the next morning a bit more hazy than usual. It wasn't until late in the fourth watch that they had found a place with Chaim and Salome for Shueh and Miri to spend the night. Yoni had slipped into bed next to his slumbering Aviva as quietly as he could, but she had instinctively rolled over to cuddle him. It had taken Yoni a long time to calm down his heartbeat enough to drift off to sleep. Now, in what must be about the third hour of the morning, Yoni stretched, cocked his neck a few times to work out the kinks, and heaved himself out of bed. Aviva had left the bed long ago; not a hint of her warmth remained in the bed. As he peered out his door, adjusting his eyes to the streaming sunlight, he saw little traffic on the road. The girls must already have returned from the spring with the morning's water. The men had already either headed off for their fields or set up their wares in the street and now sat in the shade of their own doors. As he adjusted his tunic and stepped out of his door to head for the *sherutim*, he noticed Uzi coming down the track from his fields. "I must be very late, indeed," Yoni thought to himself. "Even Uzi is up and doing." Uzi had many roles in the town. Mainly he made and sold rope, but he also concocted medicines, perfumes, and ointments. But he rarely made his way to his *kaneh-bosm* fields before the third or fourth watch of the day. It probably had something to do with his own prodigious consumption of the products of the seeds from his crop.

"Well look what the sun has roused from his slumbers," called Uzi in his always cheerful voice. "It is a beautiful day to be alive, isn't it?"

Yoni didn't know whether to shield his ears or his nose from Uzi's approach. Although he had never personally experienced it, Yoni's head felt just like others described the aftereffects of drinking too much wine. Uzi's booming voice rattled Yoni's brains a bit too hard. But the smell, like a wet dog who had just rolled in river mud, was even worse. The smoke that came from his hearth late at night imparted the stench to everything Uzi

wore. But there was no denying his medicines could drive pain away and give one a fresh look on life.

"It might be a bit more beautiful if I had one of your little goodies, my friend," Yoni grumbled from behind his hand.

"Your desire is my pleasure to fulfill," Uzi said with even more affectation than normal. He rummaged in the pouch at his slim waist and produced a wafer of dry and crumbly cake wrapped in linen. He broke off a couple bits about the size of the end of a pinkie finger and dropped them in Yoni's outstretched hand. "They go down best with a bit of milk," he said, but when he saw that Yoni had simply thrown them both into the back of his throat and swallowed, he continued "or a gulp of fresh air, I guess."

Yoni reached into his own pouch and pulled out a *minim*, put it in Uzi's waiting hand, nodded in thanks as he reconsidered whether to run home for some milk, but turned to head off to the *sherutim*, which was an even more urgent need.

"Oh," Uzi called out to him, "if you're looking for your cousin, he said to tell you he had headed up to Eliyahu's hill."

As Yoni headed into the *sherutim* his mind began wandering as he pondered the legend of Eliyahu's hill. Local legend had it that this was where Eliyahu and Elisha had gone after crossing Yordan and where the fiery chariot had descended from heaven to fetch Eliyahu away without tasting death. It was interesting, Yoni considered, that one could see the top of *Har Nevo* from the top of Eliyahu's hill, two places from which holy men had supposedly ascended into heaven. Why the tops of mountains? Couldn't God reach down to take men anywhere they were? Chanokh and his whole city was supposed to have been taken up as well, but maybe they lived on a mountain top to begin with? As he washed his hands at the basin by the door, he chanted the words to the psalm *Who shall ascend into the mountain of Adonai? And who shall stand in his holy place?* He thought to himself, since he had clean hands, he was now ready to ascend to Eliyahu's hill. The bitter taste in the back of his throat made him wonder, however, about his pure heart.

As Yoni stepped off the path to the *sherutim* back onto the main road, he saw Chaim in the distance down the street. When Chaim saw him, he waved his hand as if to signal something, but

Yoni already understood what Chaim wanted to tell him. He tapped his ear with his right hand and waved a pair of fingers up the *wadi* path toward the hill to signal that he already knew where Shueh had gone. He quickly ducked back into the hostel, begged a cup of milk and handful of nuts from Yochaved, and then headed up the road towards the hill.

Once he was past the town and surrounded by the trees on the road, he breathed deeply to flush out the smell of hostel, *sherutim*, and Uzi. He caught a whiff of balsam, which always brought back the memory of the incense wafting out of the temple in Yerushalayim. The combination of the smell, the memory of the temple, and his earlier thoughts about men walking with God, took him back to his own brush with the divine when he was a boy.

He had been in his ninth year and had drawn the lot for carrying water from *Brechat HaShiloah* up the three hundred and twenty-two steps to the temple. How many times had he counted them? He had made the journey eight or nine times each day, carrying the sacred vessel filled with water. He had been warned by the temple staff seventy times that it was an evil thing to break one of the *khadim*, so he took great care. But he also knew the basin had to be filled before he could go home for the day, so he filled it as full as possible and walked as fast as he safely could.

Late one particularly cold afternoon he was on his last round of the day when he slipped on a stair as he turned for the last ascent over the arch that bridged the valley onto the temple mount. He had managed to save the *khad* from anything worse than a small chip, but his entire load of water sloshed out the wide neck, over the edge of the railing, and onto the elaborate cap of a fat businessman whom he had passed just a few moments before on the stair. The man stood there flapping for a moment before he looked up and saw poor Yoni's horrified face just above him. He had then let loose a string of curses. Not very imaginative ones, Yoni thought. He had heard them all before. But it shamed him, especially after having been doused with the same water that pilgrims used to purify themselves before ascending the temple mount.

Yoni then heard the quiet laugh of a man standing above him on the stair. He reached down and helped Yoni stand up and retrieve his jug. Yoni had noticed his eyes first, even before he spoke. He could not recall the color. They had not been brown, like just about everyone else's eyes, but he could not place the exact color. They simply appeared bright, as if light was coming not from them: not reflected light from the sun, but a glow from within. It was very odd. Yoni remembered plain, yet finely crafted clothing of freshly laundered cotton. He caught the scent of balsam, as if the man had already been to the temple mount, but no scent of smoke or roasted meat. The nails on his fingers were exquisitely trimmed, and the skin of his hands was remarkably smooth and soft.

"Perhaps you need to work on your purification skills, my boy," the man had chuckled. "That man didn't seem to be moved to righteous living by your baptism."

Yoni, ever quick with a comeback, was speechless and baffled. What did he mean 'purification skills?' Yoni was still a boy. Someday he would become a priest and learn the rites of purification used at the altar and the *mikveh*, but that was far in the future.

"You doubt it?" the man had asked. "Come, Yochanan, let us refill your *khad* so you can finish your service for the day," he said as he began to lead Yoni back down the steps.

Yochanan? Only his father called him that. Everyone else called him Yoni. And how did the man know Yoni's name? He was sure he had never met him before or seen him among the men serving at the temple. But if he called him by his full first name, he must know Zekharyah, his father.

"Are you a friend of my father?" Yoni finally was able to blurt out.

"Yes, I have met your father once, three times three years ago as a matter of fact," the man had responded a bit cryptically as they stepped around the puddle of water from Yoni's spilled jug.

Yoni had tried to cypher the product in his head from the tables he had learned at school, but because he was confused to begin with, his brain got all befuddled. He secretly worked out the sum on his fingers beneath the jar. Nine years? "But that was

before I was even born,” he finally exclaimed. “How do you know my name?”

“Know your name?” the man laughed out loud. “Why shouldn’t I? I was the one who gave it to you. They wanted to call you Zekharyah: ‘God Remembers’. That would make you, what, the seventh in a long line of Zekharyahs stretching back a couple hundred years? Yes, God remembers. God remembers way too much about this people. While he will never forget his people, and his covenant is what keeps us his people, he also remembers what a bunch of stiff necks they have. How often they have turned a blind eye and a deaf ear on the law and the prophets. It is time for God to forget, to put behind him, the sins and transgressions of this people. The time has come for him to show his graciousness upon them. That is why you are called Yochanan: ‘Adonai is Gracious.’”

To Yoni, the man sounded like the very wisest of the *kohanim* in the temple courtyard. He spoke with the same vocabulary and rhythm as they did when they read from the sacred rolls. But none of the phrases were from any text that Yoni remembered. They seemed to come not from memory, but from the man’s own mind and mouth. And as they descended the stairs, Yoni forgot to count the steps as he invariably did. The people passing either side of them seemed to disappear into a mist. It was just him, his jug, the man holding his hand, and the melodious voice that was every bit as silky smooth as the fingers of his hand.

Then his surroundings became completely unfamiliar. He was no longer on the stairs. He was in a room. The room did not have windows. Its walls were white. It had an impossibly high ceiling with massive beams of wood holding up a polished wooden ceiling. He was seated on a low stool, and the man now stood behind him. Yoni did not know how they got here. He did not even care about his jug. He just felt the man behind him touch the top of his head with those clean and polished fingers and begin to speak to him.

“Upon you, my fellow servant, in the name of *Mashiach* I confer upon you the *kaehuna* of Aharon, which holds the keys of the ministering of angels, and of the gospel of repentance, and of baptism by immersion for the remission of sins.”

These were like the secret words used to consecrate a new priest to service in the temple, at least that's what Yoni thought they were. They could not be anything else. But young boys were not ordained to the priesthood. Not even young men. Older men became priests. What was happening here? He wanted to shrink beneath the man's hands and disappear. This should not be happening. But even as these thoughts began to creep in like weeds choking off a fresh pool of water, he opened his eyes and saw the whitened walls and smelled the balsam, and somehow, he knew that this was good. This was right.

"God is well pleased with your devotion, Yochanan," the man continued. "You will continue to grow and serve in your duties to Adonai. But you are called to serve beyond the walls and courts of the temple. In the due time of the Lord, you will be called on to go over Yordan, there to baptize this people, to make straight the way of the Lord, the *Mashiach*. And upon whom you shall see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizes with the Holy Ghost, even the *Mashiach*, the Lamb of God that shall take away the sin of the world. You, Yochanan, will see the grace of God."

When the words ended, Yoni could see in his mind's eye those words etching themselves in golden ink upon a silver roll, words that would never fade from his memory. As he blinked his eyes at the image, it was replaced by the face of the man, stooping in front of him to look him in the eye, give him a broad smile and a firm grip with his hands. They looked at each other for a moment before Yoni found the ability to speak again.

"What is your name, sir," he stammered. "Father will want to know of my calling. Whom shall I say called me?"

"Oh, your father will know," he nodded confidently. "He will remember."

With that, the man had turned on his heel and was gone. Yoni had again returned to the golden writing in his mind. He would see *Mashiach*! How many generations had passed with that hopeful expectation, and now he would see it. He was sure of it. He then stood up, ready to find his father, and tried to follow the man, but found the only door to this room on the other wall. He shook his head, wondering what was becoming of his senses, and turned to exit the room. When he came out, he found

himself in a much more familiar setting. It was the room with the basin into which he had dumped countless jugs full of water. And there, right next to the basin, was his jug. It was full of water. He reflexively walked to his jug, picked it up and emptied it into the basin, which was now full. He then walked out into the courtyard, reverently placed his jug on its rack with the other boys' jugs and started for the gate that led down out to his home.

Not twenty paces down the busy street, he met his father coming the other way. To Yoni, Zekharyah was beyond being just old. He was ancient. The other boys' fathers were old, but Yoni's *abia* was older than some of their grandmothers. He shuffled along the street, leaning heavily on his staff, barely getting one foot beyond the other on each step. Yet despite his age, he still served his shift in the temple. This month he was serving on the evening shift. As prescribed by the good manners his father had taught him, he greeted Zekharyah with dignity. "Are you well, my father?"

Zekharyah had paused to scrutinize Yoni a little closer than he normally did. "I am well," he answered. "But you. You look..." he trailed off. His father had eyed his face closely and then put both his hands on his shoulders, inspecting his clothing and sniffing to catch a whiff. "You seem different," he finally said.

"I am well enough," Yoni piped up, barely able to contain himself. But he knew now was not the time or place to reveal his extraordinary experience. "I met a man today. He knew my name, but I've never met him before. He said you would know him. Do you know him?"

Zekharyah's face was at first confused, but as his eyes darted to and fro, his nostrils flared again and seemed to catch a familiar scent. Then his eyes had focused back on Yoni. "Balsam," he said as he closed his eyes and seemed to relive his own memory. "So, your time has come. So soon for you, but just barely in time for me." Zekharyah, who was never reluctant to show open affection for his boy who had come to him so late in life, slowly bent down and embraced Yoni. Usually, Yoni would have squirmed at such a public display, but he leaned into his father's shoulder. "Of course I know him," Zekharyah

whispered. "He was the one who named you. His name is Gavriel."

In the deep evening shadows of the street, like a rock in the middle of the stream, with the press of the crowd hurrying home for dinner or running one last errand to the market, amid the scuffling of feet, conversations in the crowd, and a few barking dogs, the two clasped each other, unmoving, with the smell of balsam flitting at the edge of their senses.

Now, as Yoni strode up the base of the hill, having traversed the entire climb up the *wadi* without it registering in his consciousness, he could still make out the smell of balsam from below him. He turned back and looked over the valley. The gray green of the *wadi* snaked up from the deeper green of the river, but gave way to the browns and grays that led across the valley floor to the sterile white and pale yellow of the cliffs that led up to the blue-green tops of the Yehuda hills. Somewhere over the shimmering horizon of those hills, lay the city of Yerushalayim: home. But he could not go back ever again. His parents had both passed, taking with them the moderating influence of their daily care. As he grew into his full voice and stature, he had begun to openly announce the mission Gavriel had secretly shared with him. A message that was, at first, just uncomfortable among the Sanhedrin, soon grew to be unbearable. And so he had been forced to leave his home behind.

He had taken his inheritance, invested it with a trader in Yericho, and now lived off its meager earnings here in this border town where the great doctrinal disputes at the temple court were replaced with old men bickering about barking dogs. The exotic markets with every taste, smell, and utility had given way to whatever wares might pass through on the caravans. Stinky Uzi had taken the place of skilled and cultured physicians. And could sturdy but rough Yochaved ever stand in for the refined women of the city? The cottons and linens of the court had been exchanged for sheep and camel wool, from which the smell of the donor animal could never quite be removed. But Uzi was at least honest, Yochaved was generous, the old men could tell much better jokes than the priests, and although it could be sporadic, the caravan goods were a bit cheaper and



better tasting here in Beth-Abara. Life here was different, but it was good.

Yoni turned back to look up the hill. He could barely make out the head and shoulders of two people standing among the weathered rocks at the hill's summit. He called and waved to attract their attention. Their heads turned, and they both stood up to return his wave. The shorter one was wearing a white mantle with a vivid blue stripe. That would be Andreas. The taller one must be his cousin.

## In My Flesh Shall I See God Job 19:26

Andreas watched as Shueh picked his way carefully across the rock-strewn shoulder that led up to the summit of the hill. Andreas didn't come up here often, but after last night, he felt the need to reflect on its events and portents. He had never felt such a powerful force inside himself, nor had he imagined how quickly and smoothly things had happened after responding to that unheard voice to get off the road. He had been here enjoying the hilltop's peace as well as the afterglow of such fortuitous events for almost a full watch. The crows that congregated here during the day had at first scattered in a raucous chorus, but had by now returned to their pecking and squabbling, ignoring him as if he had been one of the rocks. They hopped about nervously as Shueh neared the summit, and then again launched into the air in a flurry of beating wings and shrill caws.

"Your friends don't seem to like me very much," Shueh quipped as he came within easy earshot.

"Nor are they my friends," Andreas replied blankly. Then, realizing that Shueh had been jesting, he tried to be less serious. "Maybe if I brought them something to eat, they'd like me better."

"That depends on what you bring them. I just had some figs from the bowl at Yochaved's," he said as he picked at his teeth. "I think there were more seeds than flesh. I'm not sure even the birds would like so many seeds."

Andreas could not think of a reply for that one, still trying to work out in his head whether more seeds was better or worse for birds, so he sat back down on the stone. Shueh looked about himself for a few minutes as his heavy breathing from the climb subsided. "They tell me this is Eliyahu's hill, the place where the chariot of fire came down from heaven. Is that right?"

"It is, according to local legend," admitted Andreas. "And as far as I know, there are no traditions associated with any other hills, so it is a pretty good claim. But it was almost a thousand years ago, so who really knows?"

"I think I trust them. A physical location like a hilltop is easy to pin down and remember from one generation to the next. It doesn't wander around. The exact location on a plain, valley, or

river is a bit harder, because it's not as easy to define," Shueh nodded as he continued to pick at his teeth. "But if you're talking about words, you've got a good point. What a person says may well be memorized word for word, but over multiple retellings, the words slowly change. A millennium's worth of such changes, it would be foolish to trust the actual words, but only the general meaning of the story. You can see that in the story of Eyov."

Andreas, who had been looking out over the distant mountains, suddenly turned to look at Shueh and furrowed his brows. "So, to you it is just a story, and not an accurate report?"

"Just a story?" Shueh chuckled. "What's wrong with a story? Stories are the best way to tell the truth."

"But if a story contains things that are not true, then it is itself not true, and the story cannot be trusted," Andreas retorted indignantly.

"I see," nodded Shueh. "If I were to tell the story of you and I meeting up here on this hill, could I say 'Andreas arose early and walked up the hill where he sat down to wait for Shueh'? Is that a true story?"

"No," Andreas replied bluntly. "I did not come here to wait for you. I came here to think."

"Forgive me," Shueh said. "Then 'Andreas arose early and walked up the hill where he sat down to think until Shueh arrived.' Would this be an accurate account?"

"Yes," Andreas agreed with a solemn nod. "Not a very interesting story, but true enough."

"No, it isn't," Shueh countered. "It is not true in the slightest." He waited for Andreas to reply, but when all Andreas did was look quizzically up at him, he continued. "When you arose, after having a good stretch, you grabbed your chew stick and a sip of wine and chanted your morning psalm as you gave your teeth a good rub. Whether you swallow the wine or spit it out depends on what kind of person you are. I'm thinking that you spit. Then, after pulling on your tunic and strapping on your sandals, you made a beeline for the *sherutim*, where you noted the color of your waters was a little dark from not having drunk enough yesterday. After relieving yourself, you headed to the cistern in the courtyard for a hearty draught of water, even

though you hate the taste of water in the morning. Then you stopped back at home and told Sara that you were going to climb up the hill and would bring a pitcher of water back down with you. Then you slung your pitcher over your shoulder and headed up the path to the hilltop.” While he was spinning the story, Shueh had watched Andreas’ mouth open occasionally as he wanted to correct the record, but being unable to get a word between Shueh’s, he finally gave up, waiting until Shueh was finished. “Now that is the truth, is it not?”

“How do you know all that?” Andreas asked in exasperation. “And what difference does my morning routine have to the story?”

“I don’t know your morning routine. I just filled in what I did this morning. I just changed the names and left out the figs,” Shueh responded. “Plus, I saw your pitcher by the spring down yonder. Your morning activities do not make any difference to the story, and that’s why you leave it out. But the resulting story is not fully accurate. A lot of stuff happened between ‘Andreas arose early’ and ‘he walked up the hill.’ Stories focus on the important points, leaving out all the mundane stuff.”

“But everything in a true story actually happened,” Andreas insisted, acknowledging the point without admitting it.

“Perhaps, but remember I said stories focus on the important points. Some points might be exaggerated to bring out their importance. For example, what if I changed our story to say, ‘Andreas sat down to think for a very long time?’ Would adding that detail make the story inaccurate?”

“But I did think for a very long time,” Andreas replied.

“And how long is ‘a very long time’?” Shueh countered. “Half an hour, three hours? Think of it. By not specifying exactly how long you sat thinking, the next teller of the story can expand or contract that time, depending on whether he wants to portray you as a philosopher or a distracted wayfarer.”

“I was leaning a little toward philosophizing before you came,” Andreas grumbled. “Now I’m just distracted.”

“There’s the true Andreas for you. He minces no words; tells you straight out that you’re a pest and should go feed the crows.” In response to Andreas’ horrified look of embarrassment, Shueh laughed and whacked Andreas on the back. “That’s just the way

I like my friends, not afraid to speak up and say what they really mean.”

“But, coming back to Eyov,” Shueh looked off toward the crows. “is it important to know that he had seven sons and exactly seven thousand sheep? What if he only had six thousand? The important point is that he was a rich man with a large family, and that is probably all that was told in the original tale. But then, to make the experiences that Eyov later recounted have more weight in our minds, we had to tell exactly how rich he was: as rich as a king! Do you have to be a king to lose everything? A simple shepherd whose little flock is scattered and eaten by wolves is affected in the same manner. It is the message of the story that is important.”

Shueh turned to face Andreas. “The details can be changed, one way or another, to suit the message the storyteller is trying to give,” he said, holding out his upturned hands, balancing them back and forth. “I mean, what about Balaam and his talking donkey? I’m not saying that Adonai can’t miraculously give sense and power to an ass to speak, but I can see it differently. Can’t we see a dog’s excitement when we hold a stick up to toss it? And then, after pretending to throw the stick and the dog’s initial reaction, he turns about and cocks his head at us, and we can hear him in our mind saying ‘What kind of fool do you think I am?’ Is it not easier to think that in the original story Balaam said his mount turned to look at him with those baleful eyes and he could almost hear him saying ‘What have I done unto thee? Why do you keep lashing me?’ But some time later the storyteller thought he could get a better reaction if Balaam didn’t interpret the donkey’s look, but actually heard him speak. Unfortunately, in the whipping up of such a miracle, the true message is lost. Even an ass can sense an angel in the path, but Balaam was dumber than his ass.”

Andreas smiled and chuckled softly. “That is rather funny.”

“I believe the details of many of our favorite stories have been altered in some way. From the fiery pillar that guarded Moshe’s people in the wilderness right down to the fire Eliyahu called down from heaven, I wouldn’t be surprised in the slightest if these turn out to be more like an *ima* dressing up her baby in the finest clothes possible for his *bris*. The baby is what is

important, not his clothes, but that is too often lost in the details of the celebration. You have to be able to see beyond the story's wrapping to see its true meaning. In the case of Eyov it was that, despite the loss of everything that he owned and everyone he loved, he would trust in God, because he knew that the only thing that really mattered was how he had borne his burdens when he stood before God on resurrection day." His hands were now raised before his eyes, and he stared at them in silence for many heartbeats.

"And Shueh stood and looked at his hands for a very long time," Andreas finally interrupted the silence.

Shueh slowly dropped his hands and stared at Andreas. "Andreas made a funny," he said incredulously. "We should raise a stone marker right here to commemorate the event for all time." He cupped his hands around his lips, calling out to no one but the crows, "Let forty thousand slaves labor for seven years to raise an obelisk to commemorate this unforgettable event." Then they both laughed heartily, and Shueh sat himself next to Andreas, playfully punching his shoulder.

They both enjoyed the moment, watching the crows hop about the ground, investigating each stone and twig for any snack that might be lurking beneath it.

"What were you thinking about for a very long time?" Shueh finally asked Andreas.

After a bit of hesitation to find just the right words, Andreas explained. "I've been trying to make sense of what happened last night. Yoni wanted us to go out with torches and scare off the robbers. Instead, I thought it would be better to sneak up on them, even though I didn't know if there were any robbers, much less where they might be. It was stupid. And yet, even after I told myself it was stupid, I just had an overwhelming feeling that it was the right thing to do. Then, when we had got very close to where you all were, even though I could not possibly have known that, I felt an urgent need to get off the road, light the torches, and start yelling. How could I have known that was what was needed?" Andreas paused a few moments, again searching for the right words. "I mean, you hear of prophets like Moshe and Yeshayahu having the Spirit of Adonai, but they were prophets. Not regular people. Not erstwhile fishermen. But

last night it felt like, if it is possible, that something, something spiritual, something outside of me, yet speaking inside my head, was telling me what to do.” He paused for another long moment before finishing his thoughts. “But even though that’s the way it feels, and we did light the torches and do the yelling in the right place, it just doesn’t make sense. In the end a man ended up dead, and Ezra had to deal with the aftermath, and poor Miri was so terrorized.” Abruptly he stood up and began to pace about, causing the crows to scatter anew. “It would have made more sense to just have come down the road with torches and scare the robbers off. I want to trust that it was God speaking, speaking to little, inconsequential Andreas, because that’s the only way I can describe it. But if it was, then why did it end up the way it did?”

*“And the spirit of Adonai shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding,”* Shueh recited from his memory. “Wisdom that you don’t yourself possess.” Shueh said, nodding to himself and looking at nothing in particular. “It is good to hear that someone else hears this voice as well. I have felt such influence many times. Sometimes it is as simple as washing away my doubts. Other times it has caused me to say words and do things that I have never thought of before. I have wanted to call them the workings of Adonai’s spirit, but like you, they don’t always turn out to look like wise words or actions. I have no answers for you, Andreas. I just know that were I not to act or say what these urges suggest, my life would be poorer. Just last night, when I sent you ahead on the road, I felt compelled to view the dead robber’s body. I felt such remorse at his passing; that it was my fault he was there to begin with, me being so lukewarm that I couldn’t even make up my mind to come here. Then I felt like I could somehow reach out and heal the man, that if I stretched myself over him like the prophet Eliyahu, I could call him back from the dead. But did it work? No. He was as cold and still as I found him when I finally pulled myself away.”

Shueh slowly stood up to join Andreas. “Eliyahu himself probably once stood here, very close. What drove him to come to this point? He knew Adonai wanted him to be here, having been able to cross Yordan dry shod like Yeshua before him. He knew that his time had come, that he needed to pass his mantle to Elias. But how did he know he was going to be called up into

heaven amid fire? I don't think he knew what was going to happen. I think he just had an overpowering urge to do what he did, then climbed this hill, much like you stepping off the road last night. I think we just must trust and follow. And even when the result is doubtful, we must remember that we can't see the reasons and outcomes of everything. Maybe some good will come from what we do."

"I'm not sure how a man's death..." Andreas started to speak, but was interrupted by a bellowing call from down the *wadi*. He turned to see the bulky figure of Yoni waving. "It looks like someone else has decided to help us figure this out," Andreas said as he waved back. "Let's see if the prophet of the wilderness has any answers."



## And There Came One Who Had Escaped

Genesis 14:13

Basha awoke with a start. He hadn't slept long. *Tzedek*, the brightest of the wandering stars, was low in the sky before he had finally dozed off. He was miserable. They had put him in a pen with a bunch of stinking goats, who wouldn't leave him alone for forever. Between them, the flies, and the endless snores of his captor who had to bed down with him, he could not find a moment's rest. On top of that, his hands were still tied behind his back. No one had been able to locate a chain in the pen, so they didn't trust anything else to shackle him. It was impossible to get into any sort of comfortable position with your hands rammed up your back. Now the sky was beginning to lighten above him, washing out *Tzedek* and all the other stars.

He had to get out of here. What were they going to do to him? The local elders would probably meet and vote a quick hanging, and that's if he was lucky. More likely they would send him off with the next batch of boots to face justice in Yericho, where he'd likely be tortured before they pinned him to a cross. He had seen that once or twice. It was beyond horrible. He was not going to go that way. If he could just wiggle out of this rope they had him in.

Luckily the bear of a man they had him penned up with was still snoring loudly. For the fortieth time, he tried to grasp the ends of the rope behind his back. The one side was long enough he could hold it in his left hand, but the other end of the knot was too short. Maybe if he were able to push up against something. He slowly pushed himself up against the fencepost he was tied to. If he kinked his elbow back as far as he could. There! He had it. No, it slipped out again. More kinking. Oh, how it hurt. But how much would it hurt with nails in his hands and feet? More pushing. He had it again.

Biting his tongue hard and cocking his head, he twisted the ends of the rope, trying to find which end went into the knot and where he could pull. Finally, he was able to work just a smidge of slack into the knot. That was all he needed. He could pull the cord just a nail's breadth, but each time he did, the knot became looser. Then the knot gave way entirely. He was free. He held

his breath and looked around. Had his captor noticed? Had anyone else walked by on the street and seen him? The street was quiet, and his monster still gurgled. Now was the time. Make a break for it.

He reached down to his ankle and quickly untied the remainder of his bonds, rose up halfway, felt for the fence, swung a leg over, then brought the other over. He was free. He wanted to spit on his captor, but instead he made a rude gesture to the curious goat that was chewing and watching him with those scary eyes. He turned and fled down the street.

But he was going the wrong way. He was headed toward the river. There was nowhere to hide in that direction. He had to get back out to the valley floor towards his cave. But as he was stopped, he noted a small shack to his right with a bench in front of it. On the bench was a ceramic bowl full of coins. Oh, how he needed some cash right now. He hadn't eaten in two days. That money could buy him bread *and* meat. But as he eyed the coins, he knew that copper coins in a ceramic dish made a fair bit of noise. He could not risk getting caught. He could not go to the cross. So, he folded his hands together, turned around, and started back up the road toward freedom.

"A real robber would have taken the lot of that cash," came a voice from the shack.

Basha froze. He had been seen. He should run, but he was too terrified. Shar would know what to do. But Shar was gone.

"They say it was you that was the robber, but now I'm not so sure," came the voice again. "Yoni thinks all his boys is right choice, but I know their quality. They're killers, they are."

Basha tried to think of something to say. "Yeah, they're not so smart either. Didn't tie me up very well," he managed to say. Then he remembered he had been tied up. An innocent man wouldn't untie himself, would he? What should he say so he didn't look so guilty? "I don't suppose you have any extra bread, would you? They tied me up and didn't give me a bite to eat. So cruel."

Basha heard the man spit in disgust, then heard the door of the shack open. Oh *chara*, he swore to himself. He's been watching me the whole time. But the man was walking to him

slowly, sizing him up. “Name’s Reuben. I help run the ferry at night. What’s your name?”

“Ba..” he started to say, but remembered he should not give out his real name. Think, man! You’re such an ass! Now you’ve got to come up with a name that starts like. Wait. Ass! You’re brilliant! He faked a coughing spasm and then spat out “Balaam. Sorry, some straw caught in my throat.”

“Yep, you’ve had yourself a tough night, I would think,” Reuben replied. I’ve got a couple of boiled eggs I was going to have for breakfast. Suppose I could share one of ‘em.” With that he turned and walked back to the shack. After poking through the coins to count them, he dumped them from the dish into his pouch and went through the door. Basha followed hesitantly, but when Reuben irritably motioned him in, he went in and closed the door behind him.

Reuben pulled a basket from a shelf, drew off the cloth cover, and pulled out a couple pieces of bread and the two eggs. He handed a bread and an egg to Basha and then plopped himself down on a low bench next to where his bed was still rolled out. There was no place for Basha to sit, so he simply lowered himself to the ground next to the bedroll. He wanted to stuff the bread into his mouth all in one piece, he was so hungry. But he had to try to show this ferryman that he wasn’t a beast. As slowly as he could make his trembling hands go, he tapped the egg on the ground and broke away the bits of the shell. He was clumsy and couldn’t get any big pieces to flake off. Instead, he had to pick tiny bits off one by one. When he was done, he looked over to Reuben to do a mock toast with the raised food, but found him already chewing on half the egg, with some of it caught in his beard. So, he deftly ripped off a part of the bread, used it to break off the end of the egg, and put it into his mouth. He made himself chew and taste the treat as if he had the best of manners and wasn’t a criminal at all.

“So, Balaam, I take it you’re from down Sela way. Good name from that area. The guy with the talking ass and all.”

Basha was secretly pleased that he had been able to come up with a believable name at such short notice, but he didn’t show it. He just took another bite of egg and said “Come from a long

line of ‘em. Once in a while there’s a Balak in the family tree, but mostly Balaams.”

Reuben snorted. “Been there, seen that. But anyways, what happened out there last night,” Reuben asked amid a small shower of breadcrumbs.

Basha had been working on this story all night. At least now he was ready to speak. “My buddy and me, Shar, was heading down this way to go visit his family in Philadelphia. But we was held up getting outta Yericho, and then Shar went and twisted his ankle. We had to set up camp. We made the mistake of lighting a fire. I guess that’s what got those boys’ mouths watering. Anyways, we was just sitting there warming our hands when all of a sudden, they light their torches and come screaming down the hill at us. Four of ‘em, all coming at once. We didn’t have a chance. They went right for Shar, cuz he’s the big one. I’m all like ‘Just leave us alone’ and ‘We ain’t done nothin’ to you,” but they keep coming for us. Shar, he’s a manly one. He tries to pick up his stick and fend ‘em off, like. That’s all he’s got, a stick, you know. It was them that had the knives and daggers. Anyway, since Shar’s tryin’ his best to defend himself, they all pile on him. He didn’t last. I don’t know what they did to him. All I know is that one of ‘em dropped his precious *khinjar* and couldn’t find it nowhere. Guess I was just too smart to get myself killed, cuz they just tied me up. They was gonna kill me too, but I told ‘em I’d go quiet like. Then one of ‘em says, the sorta tall one with the woman, she stayed up on the hill until everything was done, and he says they oughta keep one alive so they could say we was robbers and they had to kill the other one in self-defense. So, they tied me up and made me walk all the way here. And get this, Shar had his mother’s silver pendant. It’s all he has to remember her by. One of those *Goy* things with a goddess carved into it. Well, I see the man with the woman show it to her when we was walking back here. You can check it out. He probably still has it. Ask him where he got it. I betcha he makes up some story about how it belongs to his sweet, departed mommy.”

That was it. That was the whole story he had made up and memorized. He almost got it perfect. But it pinned the blame on his captors, and if somebody went out to look at Shar’s dead

body, they would have an excuse for why there was a *khinjar* out there. Basha took a deep breath and then stuffed the rest of the egg into his mouth.

“Sounds to me like you’ve been set up, boy,” mumbled Reuben. “And we’ve got to get things set to rights. I ain’t sure just what to do, but right now I’ve got a ferry to get ready for the day. How ‘bout you just sit yourself down here for a while. I’ll send a boy with some more vittles for you. You look famished. Don’t let anybody see you. Keep low. I’ll be back at lunchtime, and we’ll see if I have any news for you then.”

Reuben hustled out the door, then came banging back in again to pick up a pair of gloves and finally closed the door behind him. Basha let out a long breath, closed his eyes, and began to hope that he might get out of this after all. Then, not worrying whether it belonged to another man, he lay himself down on the tousled bedroll and fell instantly to sleep.

## There Followed Him a Mess of Meat 2 Sam 11:8

Ezra slowly opened his eyes and rubbed them vigorously. When he could see straight, he looked up to see a few tree boughs moving slowly in the breeze against the bright, blue sky. Why was he not in his bed? Then he remembered the previous night. Forced to sleep outside his own room because of his ritual uncleanness, he had had to spend the night here in a stable. Technically maybe not outside town, but the spirit of the law was being kept. At least he could just lay here until someone came to get him. He would not be allowed to have any interactions with anyone until Yoni came to do the purification ritual. He closed his eyes and listened to the breeze and a few voices going up and down the street.

Then he started. The prisoner! His eyes flew open as he sat up quickly. Too quickly. He smashed his forehead against the feeding trough. But through the shooting pain he could plainly see the empty cords that had held the robber. How had he gotten loose? He had lavished much care on those knots and was sure no one could have loosed them.

With his head throbbing he cupped his hands in the water trough and scrubbed his face vigorously, then jumped the fence and ran up the road toward the open valley. He met a man leading his goats back into town. "Did you see anyone leaving town this morning?" he shouted as he ran past.

"Nobody but you, but..." was all he heard of the man's reply. That meant that the bandit had gotten a long start on him, but maybe he could be caught before he disappeared into the caves of the cliffs or the *shvakim* in the city. But after four or five hundred strides, when the road bent again to the east, he could see his efforts would be futile. A half a dozen groups were coming down the road towards him, but no one was moving away. The man had gone to ground or was long past recovery. Ezra's chest heaved as he bent down and leaned on his knees. "Well," he thought, "justice might not be done, but at least we will not have to execute him. It is not my problem anymore." He wasn't sure how Yoni and Andreas would react, but he had done his best, and they should be content with it.

He turned back toward the river and slowly ambled back, wondering what he might find for breakfast without coming into direct contact with anyone. Yoghurt and some milled oats were what he craved at the moment, but first he discovered he had a huge thirst to quench.

With these thoughts on his mind, he almost missed the brown form slumped against the wall of the first house. It was a man, but not one that Ezra recognized. As Ezra looked at him more closely, the man's gaze was cast down suddenly, as if he did not want to be seen. Ezra stopped for a moment and regarded the man. Something about him was familiar. He was probably a trader that passed through town occasionally, but then why would he be sitting here without any beast or burdens?

"Shalom," Ezra said, hoping the man would speak and be recognized.

"Salaam," answered the man without raising his head. He was obviously from the east of the river, but with a single word, Ezra could not discern what city.

Not satisfied, Ezra asked him "Are you well, traveler?"

"I am well enough," came the quick reply, "and I am hoping to remain well, if you please."

Then Ezra noticed the man's hand stray into the folds of his vest at his waist. Then the hand paused and was slowly withdrawn. It was empty. But as Ezra looked more closely at where the hand had strayed, he saw the bulge of a concealed weapon. Then he watched as the man's hand went to his forehead, where it was lost in the shadow of his *keffiyeh*. Ezra started. There was blood on the keffiyeh. Dark patches stained the man's brown robe. This looked just like the robber that rushed against him several hours ago, the robber against whom he had had to defend himself, the robber he had killed. But Ezra dared not make the accusation. It was impossible.

"Again, I am well enough," the man said. "I have asked no alms. I do not want to be any trouble. With that he brought his right hand away from his face, palm forward, and slowly raised the other hand, mirroring his right. He was either shielding his face or making a gesture of surrender. As he raised his head to reveal his face, Ezra gasped. It *was* the robber.

“You,” was all Ezra could bring himself to say. This was indeed the man who had tried to kill him. Ezra felt the sudden well of rage within him. He wanted to lunge directly at the man’s throat and throttle him. He would make absolutely sure the man was dead this time. But Ezra had no weapon except his hands, and he also knew the man had a dagger in his belt. He remembered the robber had been a formidable foe. Fear held his rage in check, but he trembled all over as he hesitated.

But another thought came to him; unbidden, but quietly. If this robber was found alive, then Ezra would be free. Free of guilt, free from ritual uncleanness. He would have his life instantly back again. As this thought pervaded him, his trembling ceased, and he knew what to do.

“If you will surrender yourself, and your weapon, I will be of no trouble to you,” he said in a stern voice. “You will have to come with me to the *sofet*, the town’s magistrate. But if you come willingly, I will not bind you.”

Ezra was prepared for some sort of confrontation or at least bargaining, but was completely bewildered when the man reached into his robe, pulled the dagger in its sheath from his belt, laid it at Ezra’s feet, and then touched his forehead to the ground in an act of complete submission. “I ask only one thing,” came a low voice from the dust. “Please, please let me speak to the kind man who was with you before I am put to death. Please let me see the man with those wondrous eyes.”

Ezra was completely perplexed. The man that was with him? He had never seen any of Andreas’ crew except himself. He was dead on the ground, well, heavily concussed. He never would have seen any of them except Ezra, and his eyes had certainly not been ‘wondrous’ in his battle fury. That left only Shueh. Perhaps the robber had seen his eyes in the starlight? This did not make any sense, but it was the only conclusion he could come to. He knelt, picked up the dagger in its curved, silver sheath, and took the man by the hand to raise him up.

“Do I need to bind you?” he asked hesitantly. That’s not something one normally asked a combatant.

“No, I will come peacefully,” came the soft reply.

The voice was so subdued, so sincere, that even though he knew he was probably being deluded, he felt he could take the



man at his word. At least he had the dagger in his hand if things went wrong. He would hold it very tightly and ever at the ready, he decided.

“May I ask your name and your city?” Ezra ventured as they began to walk down the road towards the river crossing.

“I was called Sharjeel once, when I lived in Philadelphia,” he said wistfully. “Then I was known simply as Shar.” He paused. “I am Shar no more, however.”

Ezra didn’t quite know what to make of this last statement. But it didn’t matter. Sharjeel or Shar or Sharzebul, it didn’t matter to him. When they came to the ferry, Karon demanded his two *lepta*. To his surprise, his captive pulled an *assarion* from his pouch and pressed it into Karon’s hand. “Hm,” thought Ezra to himself. The robber had his own money. He had figured the man would have nothing, and that’s why he was robbing, but that was apparently overly simplistic thinking. When they arrived on the other side, Ezra led Shar to the *sofet’s* home several doors up the road. Unfortunately, Matan was out tending to his date trees now, they were told by Hadas, his wife. But the men were welcome to sit on the bench outside his door while they waited for her boy to fetch him. Ezra declined the offer, thinking it much better to sit on a bench at Yochaved’s with some breakfast and a drink. He told Hadas where they would be and led Shar back to the hostel.

When they had sat for a moment, Yochaved approached and asked them what they would like. “I would like a beer in a pitcher. I’m completely dry,” Ezra ordered and then looked at Shar. “What are you drinking?” When Shar hesitated, probably because he didn’t have enough money for such things, Ezra laughed and said “Order whatever you want. It’s going on Shem-du’s tab anyway. He owes me after last night.”

Shar looked a little sheepish and he turned to Yochaved. “Do you have any fresh fruit juice?”

“We’ve got some pomegranate that’s pretty fresh,” she announced in her innkeeper’s voice. “The grape is a couple days old, but we keep it in a skin in the river, so it should be good as well.”

“May I have pomegranate?” he said politely.

“Sure, and I’m supposing you’ll be wanting breakfast with that, *chaver?*” she suggested to her new friend.

After looking back at Ezra for permission, and receiving his nod, Shar asked “Would it be too much to ask for some bread, mutton, and hummus?”

“Hot or cold?” asked Yochaved.

“The mutton? Cold is fine,” was Shar’s meek reply.

Before Yochaved could turn to ask Ezra his order he barked out: “A bowl of yogurt and some milled oats.”

“Large, I’m thinking,” Yochaved laughed as she turned to go.

“A *mikveh* full, *chavera*,” he called out.

After their juice and beer had been brought out, Ezra took a long pull at his pitcher as Shar sipped at the juice and closed his eyes in delight. As Ezra smacked his lips to savor the beer’s bite, he looked about. Two merchants who had stayed the night were at a table polishing off some lentil stew. Another man, a local from the other side of the river whose name he couldn’t remember, slipped in and raised a finger indicating he would like a beer. Ezra then caught sight of Chaim carrying a pitcher of goat milks into the back of the hostel.

“Good morning, Chaim,” he called out, waving to catch his attention.

Chaim, knowing of Ezra’s predicament, just stopped and stared with slack-jawed confusion. Finally, he put down the pitcher and came a little close, but just a little. “Why are you here? I mean...”

“There’s been a change to the situation,” Ezra chuckled.

“Shar, this is Chaim, a good friend of mine. Chaim, may I introduce you to Shar, the man I killed last night.”

Utter confusion glazed Chaim’s eyes over.

“Apparently I didn’t kill him as well as I should have,” continued Ezra. “And since he’s not dead, after all, I don’t need to skulk at the city limits. And since Shem was pretty rude to me last night, we’re having breakfast on his tab. If you haven’t had breakfast, pull up a stool.”

“I,” Chaim stammered, “I just ate.”

Ezra watched as the two merchants headed out the door after they had settled their bill at the counter. “Do you happen to

know where Yoni is?" Ezra said after another pull of beer and deep belch. "Or Andreas?"

"Andreas went up to Eliyahu's hill early this morning," said Chaim, finally regaining his wits. "Yoni was looking for him, so I sent him up there as well."

Ezra felt a tug on his sleeve. It was Shar. "Are either of these men you speak of the one I saw last night?" he asked expectantly.

"I'm not sure who you saw last night," Ezra replied, "except for me. When did you see him?"

"After you all had walked away down the road," Shar explained. "He came to me."

Ezra scratched his chin, trying to put events back in order. Suddenly his face brightened. "That was Shueh. He was the man you were planning on robbing. He and his wife were camped there for the night."

"He is here," Shar exclaimed. "We must go see him."

"Sorry, pal," Chaim interjected. "He's up the hill with the rest of them. But they were staying at my house, so his wife is probably still there."

"We must go up the hill then," said Shar as he began to stand up from his stool.

"Hold on," Ezra cautioned. "We have other, more important business to attend to first." He made a motion of feeding himself from a bowl. Shar, a little dejected, lowered his head. As Ezra saw Yochaved bringing out a large bowl of yogurt with a heap of oats on a platter beside it, Ezra let out a whoop. She was closely followed by a girl carrying a platter heaped with cuts of mutton, several rounds of bread, and a thick bowl of hummus. She had to dodge the villager, who had suddenly finished his beer and felt the need to exit quickly. He disappeared into a small crowd that had just crossed the river and was beginning to browse the stalls along the road.

Chaim noticed although Shar was reluctant to eat at first, as soon as he had ripped off a corner of bread, dipped it generously in the hummus, and chewed for a moment, he seemed to forget his necessity to climb the hill. He sighed and put a hand on his belly. It would be a while before these two were satisfied. And since Shem-du would be picking up the tab, why not? "Leave the

mutton,” he called to Yochaved who was bustling behind the counter. “I’ll just have bread and hummus.”

“And a beer?” queried Yochaved?

“Make it a mead,” he answered, climbing onto a stool.



## Chapter 8

### Author's Notes

In this chapter, Shueh refers to “standing on one foot.” He is referring to a beloved 1st century BCE story from the *Talmud* in which a goy approached the Jewish sage Shammai and challenged him to “convert me on the condition that you teach me the entire Torah while I stand on one foot.” Shammai, offended by what he perceived as a flippant request to oversimplify the vast and complex body of Jewish law, drove him away with a stick. Undeterred, the goy then went to Hillel, who was known for his patience and gentle demeanor, and made the same request. Hillel accepted the challenge and famously replied: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah; the rest is its commentary. Go and learn it.”

Jews carry a long tradition of mourning the loss of the First Temple destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE, traditionally said to have occurred on the ninth day of the month of Av, or *Tisha B'av*. Later Jews would also wail the loss of the Second Temple destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE on the very same day.

Characters introduced in this chapter include the following. Characters with an asterisk are based on historical people.

- An unnamed Roman officer
- An unnamed youth from the town west of the river
- Caius, A Roman legionary soldier
- Lepidus, A Roman legionary soldier
- \*Melech Dawid. King David

## I Will Raise Them Up a Prophet Deut 18:18

Yoni was met by both Andreas and Shueh with gripped hands and slapped shoulders. He dusted off a place for himself on the rocks next to where the other two had been sitting, and plopped himself down, still breathing a little hard from his ascent up the *wadi* to the hill.

“And what brings you up here on this fine morning, Yoni?” Shueh asked.

“Mostly you,” Yoni panted in reply. “But Andreas is a bonus. What are you two doing up here anyway?”

“Solving all the land’s problems,” Andreas answered.

“And, what’s the verdict?” Yoni asked, a bit bemused.

“Oh, we pretty much solved everything, but we’re not going to tell you,” Shueh said. “In fact, we’re not going to tell anyone. We’ve vowed to keep it a secret.”

“It’s a pity I did not get here earlier then,” Yoni replied, “but thanks for leaving me some breakfast.” Shueh looked confused, but Andreas just looked away in disgust as Yoni plucked a locust from near his feet, ripped off the wings, and popped it into his mouth, chewing thoughtfully.

“What?” was all Shueh could say.

“It’s disgusting, but he does it all the time,” Andreas grimaced.

“What? What’s wrong with it?” Yoni asked innocently.

“They’re crunchy and just a little sweet. It’s best if you dip ‘em in a little honey, though. And they’re not on the list of unclean things...” Yoni did not finish his thought, but instead growled to himself.

“What’s the matter,” Andreas laughed. “Get a bad one?”

“No,” Yoni replied. “I forgot to attend to Ezra this morning. That poor man. Stuck him in a goat pen last night with the *gannab*. He’s going to be cross with me.”

“Well, before you go rushing off to purify him, sit for a while and maybe we’ll let you in on the secret,” Shueh coaxed him.

“If your secret includes the mysteries of keeping a woman happy, then I’m all in,” Yoni answered.

"O heavens no," Shueh laughed. "We solved that is knowable. We did not stray into that impenetrable deep!"

After a general round of laughter by three married men, Yoni wiped his eyes, took a deep breath, and gave Shueh a long and withering stare. When Shueh saw himself under such intense scrutiny, he sat up a little nervously and asked "What?"

"I'm going to come right out and ask it," Yoni said in a serious tone. "And I want a straight answer."

"OK, I'll do my best," Shueh said with hands raised in mock terror.

"Here it is," Yoni said, and then coughed a couple of times. Then he leaned forward, resting a hand on his thigh and thrusting the elbow out to his side. His eyes were on a level and not far distant from Shueh's. At first Shueh returned his gaze evenly, but after a moment his eyes looked away and darted from side to side nervously. Almost imperceptibly, Yoni saw Shueh lean away from him. The time had come. He coughed once more and then spoke slowly, pausing and emphasizing the simple question: "Are you, or are you not, the *Mashiach*?"

Yoni watched Shueh's face intently. He saw his eyes freeze in position. He noticed that for many moments Shueh did not inhale, and when he finally did, it was in stuttering little puffs. He watched Shueh's lips pucker, then open slightly as his gaze focused and slowly turned back to look into his own eyes. All the while, he could sense in the background as Andreas' jaw dropped open and his eyes flew wide. Then his hands and shoulders were raised in question, as his lips formed unvoiced exclamations of disbelief.

"What? How can you...? How dare...! What?" finally came forth quietly, but intensely out of Andreas' searching lips. When no answer came from Yoni, he leapt to his feet, raised both hands above his head. "What did you ask him? Is he the *Mashiach*? How can you ask him that? How can you ask anybody that? Have you gone mad?"

Yoni disregarded his raging and kept his eyes glued on Shueh's face. He could read no emotion in its blank stare. Was he angry? Was he sad? Was he confused? He thought he could see signs of such states in his eyes, but the face was completely blank. Andreas' final question had hung in the air for many



moments, Yoni saw him turn his attention slightly toward Andreas.

“No, Andreas, he has not gone mad,” Shueh said calmly. “But it takes a person whose mind lives off the beaten track to pose such a question. Yochanan ben Zekharyah has just such a mind. He asks questions no one else dares to ask. I’ve heard that, after calling the lot of priests coming out from Yerushalayim a bunch of snakes, he has the audacity to question their motives. It takes more than just chutzpah to do that. He, who is himself a Levite and ordained priest, who himself has fled the confused confines of the city for the refreshing river town, thinks himself more than a priest.” He turned his attention back to Yoni who still sat with an outthrust elbow and lowered head, but whose free hand began to pick at his knuckles. “I will answer your question if you first answer mine.”

Yoni quickly bobbed his head in assent as he brought both hands into his lap to more easily work his hands together.

“You claim many things in your preaching by the river,” Shueh intoned. “Among them, perhaps because you frequent this spot where Eliyahu completed his ministry, you claim you have some vestige of his spirit, some type of authority. Such prophetic authority has not existed among *bnei Yisrael* for twelve generations. And this supposed prophetic authority has led you to claim that you are the predecessor of *Mashiach*.” Shueh paused for a moment to let the gravity of this statement sink in.

Yoni raised an eyebrow in return. “That is not a question, but a statement,” returned Yoni. “You had a question? Please ask it as straightforwardly as I asked mine.”

“Very well,” answered Shueh. “Do you, or do you not, claim to be a prophet? And if so, from whence comes your authority?”

Yoni tried to concentrate on Shueh’s unflinching gaze, but he was distracted by more gesticulations coming from Andreas. His hands suddenly shot up in front of his chest and bounced a few times emphatically, but his mouth could only grope at word forms.

“It seems that poor Andreas, who has been your follower for years,” Shueh chuckled while glancing sidelong at his flailing companion, “wants to know the answer to this question as well.”

“Which question?” Yoni asked obstinately.

"The question I just asked you," Shueh replied, shaking his head a little in confusion.

"You didn't ask *a* question. You asked two," Yoni replied with a tiny edge in his voice. "Which one do you want me to answer?"

Shueh palmed his face and shook his head. "Yoni, what are we going to do with you?" he laughed. "You, who can't be bothered by scribes picking at every *yod* and *qere* that dot the texts, giving me grief for asking two conflated questions."

"You joke with me about having solved all the problems of the land," Yoni replied in a deadly serious tone. "But what we are about to discuss is more important than all the world; all four of its corners and all generations of its duration. Every word we will say will have deep meaning. I need you to understand that."

Having heard this, Andreas immediately sat back down and folded his hands in his lap, adopting his long-accustomed habit of listening intently to his *rav*. "Please forgive us," he spoke for himself and Shueh. "Sometimes being too familiar with a great man can lead one to treat him too casually."

"To be familiar with and casual with another grows from love, and love is not a sin," Yoni reassured them both, noting that Shueh looked a bit abashed as well. "There is nothing to forgive. If we grow from the things we learn, we will move from goodness to goodness, from grace to grace, ever upward toward perfection."

Yoni pulled his hands from his lap, pushed his fingers through his beard and tugged at it for a moment, and then raised himself to his feet. Since the other two had suddenly adopted the role of disciple, he would rise to the role of master. "I will answer both questions, since as you say, they fit inside each other nicely," he said in a confident voice. Then he turned to face down the defile of the *wadi* and looked across the wide Yordan valley toward where Yerushalayim lay hidden in the deep green folds of the highlands beyond. "I was born and raised in the very navel of the world. Indeed, before I even had a navel, when I was still in the womb, I was a prophet." He was silent a moment, but his disciples did not dare interrupt him. So, he went on.

"My *ima* tells me that a few months before I came to light, she received a visit from her cousin who was also with child.

Apparently, even in my infantile state, I was able to recognize that someone of great importance had been ushered into my presence. My *ima* says I leaped, but I like to think that I jumped to attention to acknowledge his superiority. She says that a spirit of prophecy filled the room; that she told the woman that her baby was very special; and that the woman herself spoke in wondrous terms about the child in her womb.”

“I have not heard this before,” Andreas meekly interjected. “Who was the woman? Who has her child grown up to be? Do we know him?”

“Ask Shueh whether he knows,” Yoni answered cryptically.

“Shueh, do you know this man?” Andreas quickly queried.

“I do not think I know the man,” Shueh answered tentatively, “or if it is a man or a woman. I only know that my *ima* is cousin to Yoni’s *ima*, and that we are but three moons separated in age. My own *ima* has not reported this story to me, but I know she thinks the world of Elisheva.” He paused for a moment to consider, then he continued. “My *ima* has not told me much of the circumstances of my own coming to light, which I have always found somewhat odd. She brags about how quickly my teeth came in and how soon I learned to walk and use the *sherutim*, but nothing before that. Stories of carrying my brothers and sister abound, but not of me.” He paused again and looked directly at Yoni. “Are you saying that this story is about me and my *ima*?”

“Yes, I am,” he replied, “but the story is not about you. At least not yet. It is about me and my gift and calling of prophecy. Let us focus on that.”

“The next part of the story happened some eight years later. Being born to a Levitical family, I started learning my priestly duties by carrying pitchers of water from *Brechat HaShiloah*. Much water was needed at the temple for purification and washing, and it was up to us boys to keep the basins filled. One day, in an embarrassing situation that need not be retold, I was miraculously helped to fulfill my duties by the most amazing *yeshut* I have ever met. I say *yeshut* and not *ish* on purpose. The words are important.” He turned to his disciples and looked them squarely. “Do you know why this is important?”

“*Yeshut* implies one who exists on his own terms,” Shueh answered matter-of-factly, “whereas *ish* speaks of the mortal and material man. Your choice of terminology implies your miraculous helper was more than a man.”

“Exactly,” nodded Yoni. “And what is the next step in the hierarchy of beings above man?”

“*Vatchasrehu me’at, me’elohim*,” chanted Shueh. Then, providing a *targum* for the questioning eyes of Andreas, he said “Thou hast made him but little lower than the angels.”

A great gasp escaped Andreas’ mouth. “*Rav!* You have actually seen an angel?”

“Not only seen, but heard and felt,” Yoni replied. “For he took me into a room in the temple I had never seen before, or since. He laid his hands on my head and pronounced wonderful words.” Yoni turned back toward the valley and his eyes became distant. “At the tender age of eight I was ordained to the priesthood. That, Shueh, should answer one of your questions. By what authority do I preach? By the authority of Gavriel, the messenger of Adonai.”

There was nothing but stunned silence from the two men seated on the rock, the same rock that had witnessed the ascension of Elijah and borne their silent witness for hundreds of years. A sudden warm breeze rose from the *wadi*, carrying the scent of balsam.

“But authority is simply that,” Yoni continued, “the right to act and speak in the name of Adonai. Until words are actually given, however, even one who is authorized may not speak. And yet I have told all who would listen that the *Mashiach* is coming. Where did those words come from? Are they from me? Is it my own fantasy? My own wish? No. For I will tell you a few of the words that were said as angelic hands were laid on my head: ‘In the due time of the Lord, you will be called on to go over Yardan, there to baptize this people, to make straight the way of the Lord, the *Mashiach*.’”

The balsam continued to blow up from the *wadi*. Silence descended on the rocky summit of the hill. Even the crows ceased their squabbling, having perched on twigs and branches to groom their feathers. But the silence did not last long.

“Are these not prophetic words?” Yoni asked. “Does not an authorized person relaying the words he received from a heavenly messenger constitute a prophet? You know that it does.” Having said all this, he looked one last time to the distant hills and then turned and sat down next to Shueh. “Now, I have answered your questions. The reason I am here, over Yordan in this pitiful little village on this barren hill, is to straighten out the way of *Mashiach*. I’ve been waiting a long time for him to come.” His hands found each other again as he kneaded his fingers together. His eyes found the wavering glance of Shueh and locked on them. “Has the time come? Are you, Yeshueh ben Yousef miBeit Yehouda of Natzrat, the *Mashiach* of *bnei Yisrael*?”

## The Wicked Plots Against the Righteous Psalm

37:12

Basha awoke with a start. Someone was rattling at the door. Had they come for him? But before he could get too worried, he recognized the face of Reuben. He wiped the drool that had pooled on the pillow off his cheek and rubbed at his eyes as a massive yawn threatened to dislodge his jaw.

“I see you’ve been sleepin’ well,” Reuben huffed, “So much you couldn’t even be bothered to eat the vittles I had the boy bring ya.”

Basha did a double take at the plate of beans and bread that sat next to his elbow. He started to reach for it but found himself doing another double take as another man came through the door. His uncovered head was bare, practically no hair on his head, and absolutely none on his chin. An expensive cloak was clasped by an even more expensive broach at his right breast. This was a very rich man. But Basha caught the glitter of cold steel where his cloak opened at his left hip. This was also a very dangerous man. He was obviously *Romim*, but not just some boot. If he wasn’t a *centurion*, he was at least an *option*.

“Lookee what come wanderin’ into town today,” Reuben crowed. “We got us a lawman. Normally the lord and master of the ferry woulda sent for his dues yesterday, but lucky for you, he came a day late, what with the holidays and all. Seems there’s been enough robbery on the highway that he sent along some insurance.”

Basha felt a knot grab at his guts. Reuben had turned him in. There was probably some reward for his head, and the wretch had claimed it. “Stupid! Stupid jerk,” he thought to himself. Not Reuben, but himself. “You should’ve lit out of here as soon as the skunk of a ferryman had left him. Now he was caught. He would be pinned for sure.

“Yep, this is the one I was tellin’ you about,” Reuben said to the officer. “He can tell you who it was that killed that poor soul down the road.”

The knot in his guts flew away as Basha took a deep breath. The officer had come to help him, not pin him.

“*Dic aliter*,” barked the officer in return. Apparently, he hadn’t learned to speak with the natives yet, Basha thought. He needed it to be repeated so he could understand.

“Aw, crabapples,” Reuben muttered. “Hold on,” he motioned with pumping, upraised hands. “I’ll get me a boy to help.”

Reuben stepped quickly out the door, leaving the officer towering over Basha. He drew his outstretched legs in and wrapped his arms around them, feeling weak as a worm. He smiled awkwardly, not knowing what to do. But his gut, at least not knotting anymore, was practically shrieking for food. Basha eyed the plate, then got the idea to make nice with the officer. He grabbed the plate, stood up, and offered it to the officer. The man sniffed at the beans, made a face, and waved the plate away. Desperate to eat, but knowing he couldn’t do it alone, Basha picked up a round of flatbread and waved it in front of his nose. He wanted to say that it was very good. “*Bon*,” he said hopefully. “*Multu...*” he didn’t know the endings of Latin words. He always got them wrong. “*Multimaximus bon*,” he finally spat out.

The officer snorted in reply, but at least he seemed to think Basha was funny. “*Multum bonum*,” he said helpfully, and then picked up another round, and promptly stuffed half of it into his mouth.

Heaving a sigh of desperate relief, Basha followed suit, grateful the officer wasn’t dainty. Soon they were both chewing, smiling at each other, and laughing unnecessarily.

To his relief, Reuben returned and ushered a boy of about fourteen into the room. It was getting crowded now. Basha gestured for the officer to sit in the single chair, while he sat back down at his feet, hoping to appear helpful. Reuben closed the door and stood right beside it, while the boy shuffled near to the officer.

“This is the one,” Reuben started back up. “He says he was ambushed out there on the road by folks as live on the other side of the river.” He waited while the boy said a bunch of soldier-speak so the officer could understand. He didn’t quite get it right, because the officer had to ask him a question before the boy

figured the right way to say it. Then the officer motioned for Reuben to get on with it.

“You tell him your story then,” Reuben said to Basha. Lucky that Basha had been going over the details while he was chewing bread and laughing with the officer. Because he had run with some crowds where nobody spoke the same tongue, Basha knew how to break up his words into small bits so as someone else could figure out how to repeat them in the other tongue. And so, Basha told his story, breaking it up, but trying to keep it the same as he had practiced. Once or twice the officer asked a question. “*Ubi arma?*” he had demanded, wanting to know what had happened to Shar’s *khinjar*. “Somewhere out there,” was all Basha could say, motioning vaguely in the direction he hoped was up the road toward Yericho.

When he was done, he looked back at Reuben, wondering what came next. The officer barked another bunch of nonsense. The boy asked Reuben whether that was the same story he had told earlier. Reuben shrugged, pursed his lips, and raised his eyebrows. “Sound about right to me,” he said.

The officer then eyed Basha up and down, like he was taking his skin right off his bones. Apparently, he had some more questions, but he wanted Basha to ask the questions himself.

He made him stand up and asked, “Where from you?”

“Sela,” Basha said

“Where now live you?” was the next question.

“Sela,” Basha lied.

“Why in Yericho you were?” the officer demanded.

Basha froze. He had not thought about why he should be in Yericho, only that he and Shar were on their way to Philadelphia. He couldn’t be a merchant, because he hadn’t told the story of being relieved of his own goods. But since he hadn’t just said it outright, he knew he had to come up with something, and it had to be something he wouldn’t have wanted to have said immediately. What was it?

“Now. Why in Yericho you were?” the officer yelled at him.

Ah! He had it. Why else would a man not be ready to say the truth? He bent his head and tried to be a little skunky himself.

“Domma? Domma bellima?” he said as he hunched his



shoulders like he had seen other men do when they were caught by their women.

The officer's face broke up into a huge grin. "*Domina bella?*" he guffawed as he traced an hourglass figure with his hands. "A beautiful length," he said in Basha's tongue, pronouncing the word for *lady* wrong. But Basha wasn't going to correct the man.

The officer turned back to Reuben. Through the boy he asked where the men who had done all this were now.

"They are up on top of the hill on the other side of the river," Reuben answered. When the officer asked through the boy how Reuben knew this, he said "I sent someone to find out. He told me he saw the man at the hostel who did the killing with one of his friends, and that someone else had said the rest of the group was up the hill and that they was all gonna go up there."

The officer, pointing to himself and then up toward the top of a hill, looked questioningly and shook his head.

"Oh no, no way," Reuben understood. "We ain't gonna go up to find them. Every afternoon at about the seventh hour the leader of the group comes down here to harass the travelers with his bunk. We can catch 'em then."

The officer looked relieved. But not completely satisfied. "Names?" he barked.

Reuben looked toward the ceiling and squinted. "I can tell you myself that its Yoni, Andreas, Ezra, and Shem-du, as I saw 'em trundling off into the night last night. But there's this other character, Shueh," he recited.

"Yonee, Andras, Etsra, Shimdu, et Shooah," the officer repeated, obviously making a mental note, although he said the names strangely. He pointed to Basha and then to the floor. He would do just that, stay right here. He also saw the officer make eating motions to the boy and then point to Basha. He pulled a coin from inside his cloak and handed it to the boy. Then he shoved him toward the door.

The other three hustled out the door. It was already about the fifth hour, as far as Basha could tell. Just two more hours. He wondered what would happen. But at least he'd have something to eat while he waited, Basha smiled to himself.

## At the Mouth of Two Witnesses Deut 17:6

“Am I the *Mashiach*?” Shueh looked back at Yoni with despair in his face. “If I were, wouldn’t I know it? I mean, what does it even mean to be *Mashiach*.”

Yoni reached out a hand and laid it on Shueh’s knee. “Believe it or not, that is the best answer you could have given,” he said. “Let’s leave your answer there: you doubt you are the one, because you think you should know if you are.” Turning to Andreas, he took on a different tone. “Andreas, oral recitation time. We’ve talked much about this over your training. Can you rehearse to Shueh what you have learned about the *Mashiach*?”

Andreas had learned well the recitation he was being asked to give, but it was still intimidating to do it under his master’s eyes, and what’s more, in the presence of one who could be the actual subject of his recitation. He stood and breathed deeply to alleviate his nerves, then started in. “According to Yeshayahu and Yereimiah he must first of all be an heir to the lineage of *Melech Dawid*, able to take up the crown by right of inheritance. Zecharya tells us that he will build the temple of Adonai, and Yeshayahu says that he will teach us the ways of Adonai from this temple in the last days.”

“And he will establish the kingdom of God on earth,” Shueh asked? “Is that correct?”

“Yes,” Andreas said excitedly. “Yeshayahu says that all nations will flow unto it.”

“The *Mitzrayim* and *Partim*,” Shueh prompted?

“Of course,” exclaimed Andreas.

“What about the *Romim* and the *Goyim*,” Shueh queried?

“Everyone,” Andreas concluded. “All nations.”

“And what will be the cause of their beating their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks,” Shueh asked? When he saw Andreas’ mouth opening and closing without any words coming out, he knew this was the extent of his training. He decided now to turn his questioning to Yoni.

“Cousin,” he asked, “what do you think?”

“Oh, I have imagined this countless times,” Yoni answered confidently. “Once they know *Mashiach* has come, hordes will

come flocking back from Babylon and Alexandria. The army will be huge."

"Oh," said Shueh. "And the *Romim* will just let them in, no questions asked. But where will they be quartered, Yoni? Them and their wives and children. And I don't suppose even their old men will stay behind and miss the spectacle. Will you open up your room to them?"

"Details," Yoni huffed. "Don't get caught up in them. Adonai will provide."

"But where will they get their weapons," Shueh drilled him. "I'm assuming this horde's purpose will initially be to drive out the *Romim*. There will have to be a lot of plowshares and pruning hooks beat into weapons of war before that can happen. Or will the migrating sons of Israel despoil their hosts of their weapons before leaving?"

Yoni did not open and close his mouth wordlessly like Andreas had done, but simply glared confusedly at Shueh.

"I'm guessing you imagined them marching in glorious ranks of armor and infantry," he continued, "marshalled by *Mashiach's* voice booming out across the plain. But no, you would say, there will be generals and lieutenants through which to pass the orders. But I ask you again, who are these leaders who faithfully pass on the orders of *Mashiach* without question? Where will those men come from? Will you be one of them?"

"I had supposed..." Yoni began, but then trailed off, seeing the futility in giving voice to his vague dreams.

"You had supposed you would be chief lieutenant, and that all other leaders would listen to you. You had imagined being able to cow the chief priests of the temple and the Tzadukim princes with your authority, telling them once and for all what they should do." Shueh paused and laid a soft hand on Yoni's forearm. "Yes, I can see you being a fierce and brave lieutenant, but can you possibly think they could be constrained to willingly listen to you? Can you imagine them being unified in any way at all? Did you imagine that simply the sudden appearance of a bright and shining *Mashiach* could someone blow the dirt and decay out of the corners of these men's souls causing them to suddenly be new men?"

Shueh tried to look into Yoni's eyes, but his head was bowed. Shueh then turned to look at Andreas, but his eyes were covered as he cringed behind his hand scratching his hairline.

"I'm guessing that you have both imagined *Mashiach* to be something of a new Alexander," he explained, looking out over the crows hopping about, "a brave but invincible upstart from a small, little land that brilliantly rises to put not only the Goyim, Mitzrayim, and Partim to flight, but even the great Romim. Who cares about weapons, training, provisions, or transport. It will all descend from heaven like *mana*."

"But even if *Mashiach* were some latter-day Alexander," he said dejectedly, "even if he could somehow marshal the dispersed might of Israel, build a New Yerushalayim, and beat the entire world into submission; even if they learn war no more, but were willingly subject to him, and the whole world is caught up in singing a single new song of peace and harmony; even if heaven comes to earth; what will happen when *Mashiach* dies?"

Both Andreas and Yoni turned to look at him with startled eyes. "But, but *Mashiah* will be with us, forever," Andreas stuttered confusedly.

"Is *Mashiach* a man or a god," Shueh asked them both. "If he's a God, then we're going to have a pretty hard time convincing the *ravvi* of his credentials. They're not looking for a God. Not even God's son. Their *Mashiach* may be blue-blooded, but he does have blood. And even if *Mashiach* is some sort of God/Man hybrid, a demigod if you will, even a demigod must die in the end. Did not even mighty Heracles, trapped in the bloody and poisonous cloak of his enemy, have to build his own funeral pyre and crawl on it himself?"

"*Mashiach* will surely die. And when he does, who will fill his shoes? Alexander's generals didn't even wait for his body to cool before they were carving up his empire. Even the great Dawid's sons split his kingdom up before he was even dead. What makes you think it would be any different after *Mashiach* is called home?"

"No, Andreas my friend," Shueh concluded, "the scriptures you have learned about *Mashiach's* credentials are not to be interpreted after the manner of the world. If this is the *Mashiach* you are expecting, you had better find someone else. I am not he."

I am not a warlord, demagogue, or prince. I am a craftsman, friend, and husband.”

The three men sat in stillness as the breeze shifted to the east, blowing hot and dry from the peaks of Amman. Yoni took a swig from his water bottle and passed it around.

After Shueh had drunk and dried his lips, he said, “But there is another option for *Mashiach*. It is one who does not make one people rule over all others, not to make one person better than another, but one who makes people better than themselves. He takes whatever is bad or dark out of people and fills them with light. He makes people everywhere more concerned with living a good life than having a better life than their neighbor.”

“Ah,” Yoni chuckled, “but now you come to the crux of a question that has been vexing prophets and philosophers from the beginning of time. What is the good life?”

It was Shueh’s turn to stand and take on the role of speaker. He held his right hand high in the air, as if holding something. Looking up to it, he said, “For us, *bnei Yisrael*, since Adonai created us in his own image, then we must fill the measure of our creation and become like him. And we know he is eternal and good.” Then he held up his left hand in a like manner, but slightly lower. “But we aren’t good at all, are we? We choose to leave the path and bring evil into the world.” His left hand slowly moved down and away from his right. “Instead of Eden we choose briars and thorns. Our hearts are estranged from Adonai, and our souls are spattered with the stains of our wandering.” His left hand had turned over with a quick flip as if to cast the object on the ground. “If we want to get back to Eden to partake of the tree, we will have to contend with the *keruvim* and their flaming sword who turn every way to the tree of life. It is basically impossible for mankind to return to being one with Adonai.” He paused, with hands in juxtaposition and shrugged shoulders.

“Maybe at some point God will figure that we have suffered enough,” Andreas interjected, “and have the *keruvim* put the sword away? Then we could all come to the tree freely. I mean, God is after all, our Father, and loves us. Doesn’t he?”

“Andreas, where do you think that sword and tree are?” Yoni questioned.

“Moshe tells us it is eastward, in Eden,” replied Andreas dutifully, raising an arm and waving vaguely in an eastward direction.

“How many days’ travel is it?” Yoni egged him on. “Is it before or after you come to Sinim?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Andreas answered, a little exasperated. “You’re the prophet here. Why don’t you tell us?”

“What Yoni is trying to get you to realize,” Shueh said, “is Eden is not really a place, nor is there a monstrous *keruv* hefting a flaming sword in front of a tree. Storytelling, Andreas. Remember?” Shueh turned to Yoni, wondering whether he should repeat what they had talked about. Yoni’s hand, wedged near his waist, lazily raised itself and waved that no explanation was needed.

“A symbol, like a flaming sword, can be interpreted in many ways,” Shueh continued. “It doesn’t take a prophet to explain exactly what it means, each of us can understand it in his own way. Here’s how I see it. A sword is used in battle. It represents war, death, and destruction. A flame consumes and signals destruction, but it can also be interpreted as anger, hate, and malice. The sword is something you can see and touch.” He held up his right forearm and grabbed at it with his fingers. “The flame is more inside you, not seen or felt with your hands,” he said, tapping his chest and then his forehead.

“It’s not something outside us, Andreas. It is us. It is our very nature. It is what Adam became when he was cast out of the garden. There is good in us, but there is also evil. Sometimes we’re virtuous. At others, we’re vicious. We seek after both light and darkness. We experience health, as well as sickness. Some people do nothing but seek pleasure, while there are others who delight in pain.”

“And the *Mashiach* will take that all away?” wondered Andreas.

“What, reach in and magically change our hearts?” Yoni scoffed. “Even King Sha’ul was given a new heart at one point, and look how he ended up.”

“But if he doesn’t take it away, how will we ever become one with God?” Andreas complained. “We’ll never be rid of our

evil nature. Even the best of us still gets angry or does something selfish once in a while.”

“You mean, even you?” Yoni laughed.

“Yes, me,” Andreas replied. “And you too. I’ve heard what you mutter under your breath after you contend with a batch of *Perushim*.”

Shueh let out a burst of laughter. “Something worse than vipers, I imagine,” he chuckled.

“They deserve it,” Yoni grumbled. “But what I don’t see is this. God knows we make mistakes. He knew it before he made us. When we don’t listen to him, he sends us off into exile for a few years or plagues us with *Herodiyim* and *Romim*. But that’s us as a people. Surely there are individuals who listen to him and try their best. Sure, they make a few mistakes along the way, but they’re good people. Can’t the Lord Adonai just cut them a break and welcome them to the hereafter with open arms?”

“I’m certain he’s standing there with open arms, ready to forgive,” Shueh answered. “But there’s a problem. It’s not just him that needs to forgive us.”

Andreas cocked his head with a quizzical expression while Yoni heaved himself forward and began plucking at his fingers. “What do others have to do with it,” Yoni asked.

Shueh thought for a moment, then came back and sat down between his new friends. “Moshe’s third book tells us of Yom Kippur, our most holy festival. *Venatan aharon al-shni has'irim, goralot--goral ahad lihava, vegoral ahad la'azazel*. And before Andreas interrupts for a *targum*, I’ll interpret for him. Aaron was charged to select between two goats, one that would be sacrificed, and the other that would be sent away into the wilderness. There is, of course, much more to Yom Kippur than this, but why two goats? And why their different fates?”

Andreas was the first to speak. “The symbolism of the sacrificial lamb is clear. His blood in our place. It is sprinkled in the presence of Adonai to cover our sins. The goat’s death in our place to atone for our sins.”

Shueh nodded. “Almost true. And I don’t blame you for not understanding the fullness of it. Few people understand.”

Andreas was incredulous. “What have I missed?” he asked a bit prickly.

"How many goats are sacrificed?" Shueh asked.

"One," he replied. "We already established that."

"A multitude of goats for a multitude of people?" Shueh asked again.

"Just one," Andreas intoned as he held up his thumb and waggled it a bit.

"One goat is symbolic of the one for whom he atones," Shueh explained. "When you said, 'His blood in our place,' and 'the goat's death in our place,' you used the wrong pronoun. It should be 'His blood in *my* place,' and 'the goat's death in *my* place.' Each one of us should look to the altar, seeking forgiveness for *his own* faults."

"I'm sorry, I don't see the difference," Andreas complained. "There is still just one goat for a multitude. Even if each person is just laying his own personal sins on the goat, the one goat still covers the offering of the multitude's sins."

"This is absolutely true," Shueh nodded. "But you're still missing the point. What about the sins of your neighbor? What about the fishmonger in Migdal Nunayya, who promised you one price for sardines, but then called your catch inferior and would only pay half that price?"

Andreas bowed his head, inhaled deeply, then let it out as a long sigh and looked at Shueh through his eyebrows. "I guess, if he is repentant, his own sin would be forgiven as well as mine," he finally admitted.

"But what about this," Shueh asked as he turned and placed both his hands on Andreas' chest. "What about this flaming sword still burning in your breast after these many years?"

A long silence ensued. Shueh's hands remained on Andreas' chest as Andreas' gaze dropped to regard them. Then he screwed his eyes shut, furrowed his brow, and his lips stretched in a deep grimace. Finally, he grasped each of Shueh's hands in his own, raised his head and said "That's the other goat, isn't it?"

"Exactly," Shueh gently confirmed. Then he raised his hands from Andreas' chest, cupped his ears between them, and pulled his forehead to his lips, planting a huge and noisy kiss on it. Turning to Yoni he said "You've got a good one here, Yoni. You should hang on to him." Turning back to Andreas and releasing



him from his grip, he said "Go on. Explain how you came to that amazing conclusion."

"Well, I envisioned entering heaven," Andreas explained. "It would be bliss for me, because I had been forgiven. But when Shmuel shows up, he too having been forgiven, I saw the enmity between us. It wouldn't be bliss for either of us until we were right with each other. I'm guessing that, for us to give up our grievances with others, we have to hang them on the back of *la'azazel* the scapegoat, and let him go off wandering in the desert."

Yoni thought about this for a moment, nodding his head in agreement at first, but then his brow furrowed. "Oh sure, just let everybody else go completely free," Yoni grumped. "I'm sorry, but that just doesn't sit well with me. What about those holier-than-thou lot at the temple? Sorry to be presumptuous and all, but they practically stoned this prophet, and really did drive him into the wilderness. What? I'm just supposed to forgive and forget?"

"Well, yes you are," Shueh admitted, "but there's more to it than that." He thought for a moment, then said "Do you expect to get into heaven free and clear for just asking God to forgive you for cursing those *Perushim* under your breath?"

Yoni bobbed his head side to side while rolling his eyes and said, "No. Believe me, he has already chastened me for that," he admitted, "And despite what Andreas says, I have not done it in some time."

"Two weeks is a long time?" Andreas countered.

"It is for me," Yoni shot back. "I'm trying, at least, aren't I? Those priests certainly haven't come begging for me to come back."

"Not yet," Shueh admitted, "and you shouldn't expect an invitation. But think of it, if ever any one of them regrets what they did to you, don't you think they will receive their own appropriate chastisement, feel bad about it, and try to be nicer to the next prophet that comes along?"

Shueh was interrupted by a scuffle among the crows. One of them, having finished his grooming, had found a tasty morsel. But now the rest of the mob had abandoned the tree branches and were swirling around him, trying to steal it for themselves. Much

noise, dust, and feathers ensued. Shueh arose, took a few steps toward the oblivious crows, and called out in a sudden, sharp voice for silence: “*Shaket!*” The startled birds all dropped to the ground and turned to look at him, even the one currently clutching the morsel in its beak. “*Shalom,*” Shueh then said in a quieter voice. In the ensuing peace that resulted, the morsel disappeared down its possessor’s craw. But before the others could notice it, Shueh pulled a handful of figs from the pouch at his waist. With a slow, underhanded swoop of his hand, he sent the figs tumbling toward the flock. With barely a squawk, each of the birds found his own fig, clutched it in its claw, and flapped back to its branch.

As the birds were settling, he said “This is the duty and calling of the *Mashiach*. He chastises us for our sins, finds a way to pull the fiery flaming sword from within each of our breasts, makes up for our weaknesses, and promises that he will do the same with all others. We don’t take upon ourselves the task of justice or vengeance. We leave it in his hands, trusting in his mercy and equity.”

Another pause ensued as Andreas and Yoni watched the crows gulp their figs and then return to quietly grooming themselves on their separate branches.

Andreas, after contemplating the crows for awhile, turned to Shueh and asked. “How in the world did you do that?”

“What? Break up their fight? I don’t know. It just happens sometimes. It’s like they actually listen to me.” Shueh pondered as he came back to take his seat. “But what is amazing to me is how what I did somehow matched what I wanted to say.” He shook his head a bit, the ringlets of his curly hair dancing on his forehead. “It is uncanny how that happens sometimes.”

“Yeah,” nodded Yoni, “if I could teach like that, we’d have a bigger and nicer city here than Yerushalayim.”

“Speaking of which, we’ve been here a long time,” Shueh said.

“A very long time,” Andreas corrected him. They both laughed. “And I have a feeling that Ezra is anxiously awaiting our return, as he has been waiting a long time for his cleansing.”

“I don’t know what the joke is,” Yoni countered, “But I don’t feel any urgency to purify Ezra, for some reason, and I’m

not letting Shueh off the hook. He has given us a wonderful lecture on who *Mashiach* is and who he isn't, but he hasn't told us whether he is Him."

"Andreas has told us what the *Yehudim* foresee in *Torah* and *Nevi'im*," Shueh said a bit vacantly, as if his mind were elsewhere. "And I have tried to outline a thing or two that are in these scriptures but are not included in the *ravvi's* discussions. But I believe there is more, barely hinted at in scripture, but told vividly and explicitly in folklore."

Yoni snorted. "Do you mean the mythology of the *goyim*?" he asked incredulously. "I had heard others say that you dabble in those wretched tales, but I did not believe it."

"Andreas and I were talking about some tales before you arrived," Shueh's eyes came back to the present. "Some stories we tell are a thousand years old or more. Moshe in his basket; Noach and his *tevet*; Eliyahu and his fiery chariot. Does the fact that they are of our tradition make them any more or less true than tales of other traditions?"

Andreas opened his mouth with a look of determination, but then slowly shut it again. Yoni, however, could not contain himself. "Zeus? Aphrodite? Jason and the Fleece of Gold? How...? He jammed his eyes closed and struggled to find words. "What possible truth or value can you find in a god who cheats on his wife any chance he gets, or goddesses who fight like lionesses over a golden apple? I mean never mind that they talk about women being divine in the first place. What a stinking sack of *tzo'ah*!"

Andreas cringed at Yoni's choice of words, but Shueh smiled and shook his head a bit. "Yoni," he said, "just because our traditions are true, does that automatically make everyone else's a worthless bag of fertilizer? Is everything black and white to you; good versus evil; right against wrong?" You know what the *goyim* say about us, and just about everyone else for that matter? They call us barbarians: a slovenly and uncouth people. But the word originally comes from the fact that the *goyim* just thought that since everyone else's language sounded simply like '*bah bah bah bah*' to them, that they couldn't be saying anything intelligent."

Andreas, who because of his upbringing easily flipped between the *goy* as *yehudi* tongues, chimed in quickly on this. “The fact that they discount entire nations because they cannot be bothered to learn another tongue is itself a marker of their own barbarity. My *abia* often went off about how stupid it was to be rooted only in one tongue or tradition. And he was serious about it. My name is *goy* and my brother’s name is *yehudi*. Same story with our sisters.”

“But try as we might,” Shueh interjected, “we aren’t going to change Yoni’s deep-seated distaste of *goy* worship or folk traditions while standing on one foot. But I will put a question to him to help me answer the one he has set to me.” Turning to Yoni he asked “I ask this of a man who sees black and white and good against evil. Alexander *ha-Gadol*: was he indeed ‘great’?”

Yoni was wary. “Great? he asked. “Well, that’s what we call him. He was certainly larger than life.”

“But was he truly a great man? Shueh prodded. “Great men are usually considered good men as well. Was he good or was he evil?”

“Depends on who you ask, I guess,” Yoni equivocated. “Between drinking himself to death and cavorting with that boy of his, it’s hard to call him good. But the changes he brought to the world? I can see the good in that. But what has that got to do with *Mashiach*?”

“I’ll try to explain quickly, on one foot, as it were. I believe many of the changes that Alexander brought to our little corner of the world were good. Perhaps the best change is that it got the *Yehudim* thinking again. After the humiliation of *Tisha B’Av*, we were so terrified of doing anything outside the law that we became slaves to it. But when the *goyim* swept through, some of us woke up and learned that thinking is not necessarily a bad thing. The *Perushim* at least try to apply logic to the law, even if they’re wide of the mark most times.

“God could have kept Alexander out of *Haaretz Yisrael*, but he didn’t. I think there was something about introducing us to *goy* language, culture, or stories was meant to be,” Shueh explained. “That’s what I want to establish, Yoni. God wanted us to come in contact with the *goy*. There’s something to be had from them. And one of those things is their stories.”

“Then tell me a story besides the ones where god becomes a horny swan,” Yoni grumbled.

“How about Prometheus,” Shueh suggested. “the immortal friend of Zeus who created men out of clay and then brought them fire and learning? Sound familiar?”

“You mean the one who Zeus chained to a rock so his innards could be ripped out every day by hungry vultures?” Yoni snorted. “Yeah, that’s a great story.”

“And how about Heracles,” Shueh continued, “the half-blooded god who had to perform impossible labors to atone for a sin that was not his own fault?”

“Yeah,” answered Yoni, “you mentioned him a little while ago: pain so bad that he had to off himself. Again, great story.”

“What did these two heroes have in common?” Shueh asked Yoni.

Yoni sat back, brought his hands in front of him, and kneaded them together for a few quiet moments. Finally, he answered cautiously, “They both suffered?”

“That too,” Shueh conceded. “But more importantly, they were both divine. Prometheus fully, and Heracles by half.”

“Well, yeah,” Yoni excused himself, “I thought that was a given.”

“A beetle crawling along a branch does not know if that branch is straight or curved. But if he doesn’t take note, he might end up right back on the ground, instead of having climbed the tree” Shueh explained. “We know that *Yehudi* tradition, to which we are so closely bound, seems to teach us only of a *Mashiach* who delivers us from physical bondage for what will necessarily turn out to be but a brief period. We also know that God allowed Alexander to bring the *Yehudi* the art of thinking and reasoning along with their stories a divine savior who must suffer greatly.

“The hints to this in scripture are hidden and obscure, and have thus escaped the notice of the *ravvi*. But when you keep that in mind as you read what Yeshayahu wrote: *Hero, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace*, you begin to see that *Mashiach* has to be nothing less than the Son of God. Do I look like the Son of God to you?”

He stood up, turned to the seated Yoni, and with gestures to punctuate each phrase, said “How could I, a normal mortal man

born of woman, be the Anointed One, the Lamb of Pascha, the Scapegoat? Why must you belabor this point? Do I have to kill myself for you to believe that I am not the Son of God?"

"Born of woman, you say?" said Yoni, nonplussed and again leaning back on his elbows. "Just like Heracles and Perseus? Who did you say your father was?"

Shueh froze stock still, except for his right heel, which seemingly on its own beat an uneven pulse on the rock beneath him. An occasional sharp intake of breath could be heard from his nostrils, as his jaw was clenched shut.

"Your mother was married to Yousef," Yoni continued after a long pause. "Wasn't he your father, then? Don't you look and sound just like him?"

Another long moment passed, the only response from Shueh being the tapping of his heel.

"Oh, that's right, the whole town of Natzrat knows he was not your real father. But your mother, she never let on who it was, did she?"

Andreas practically exploded up from his seat. "Yoni, that is enough! How can you torment him so?" But Yoni's slow and stern gaze at Andreas let him know it was not his time to speak yet. But Andreas could not back down entirely. He stepped next to Shueh and put his arm around his shoulders, staring back at Yoni with steely resolve.

"Maybe she couldn't tell you, because it would cause a scandal at the temple?" Yoni continued to needle Shueh. "Did not your mother leave her service at the temple suddenly, and had she not before been on friendly terms with Gamaliel? Tell me you have not thought of this before."

Shueh screwed his eyes shut and slowly rolled his head in a full circle about his shoulders. "Gamaliel is *not* my father," was all that finally spat from his lips.

"Hm. Not Yousef and not Gamaliel, eh?" Yoni persisted in his cross-examination. "Well perhaps we should look at some of your characteristics to see if we can backtrack and locate your *abia*. How are you at working with rock and stone? Does it seem to come to you naturally, like you can almost remember what's inside the stone? Hm. Who would know what is inside a stone before cracking it open?"

“Don’t be silly, Yoni,” chided Andreas. “It doesn’t matter who one’s father is. Nobody could know what’s inside a stone, unless...” Then he paused with his jaw dangling and parted lips.

“Who can quote the entirety of holy writ, even when not yet twelve years old?” Yoni asked.

This provoked a response from Shueh. “As I told the *tanna* then,” he said through gritted teeth, “I have to hear it first in order to memorize it.”

“Yes, as if you’re remembering it, not learning it afresh,” Yoni persuaded him. “But that’s not all,” he went on. “Show your hands to Andreas, Shueh.” Andreas reached down to take one of Shueh’s hands in his own and examine it. “How many scars do you see, Andreas? How many bent fingers? Go ahead, compare it to your own. Are you telling me the few fishhooks that pierced your hide in your short fishing career were more devastating than the cuts, scrapes, and wrenched knuckles a stonemason would wear after a dozen years of labor?”

“To be honest, his hands look more like a scribe’s than a craftsman’s,” Andreas had to admit. “Although they are not stained with ink.”

Yoni was not done. “When was the last time you ate, Andreas?”

He had to think for a moment. “Not since before we headed out in our search party last night,” Andreas answered. “But I have had somewhat to drink. Why do you ask?”

“I just wondered how you were feeling,” Yoni said flippantly. “That’s much more than a half day without sustenance. Careful! You’ll be so hungry at dinner that you’ll embarrass Salome with your lack of manners. I don’t suppose you’ll be up much past sunset tonight either, after a long night and an early morning.” Yoni smiled and looked back at Shueh. “What’s the longest you’ve gone without eating and sleeping, cousin?”

Shueh slid away from Andreas’ half embrace and slowly settled back onto the rock next to Yoni. “I’m assuming in your visit with Yakov last week that he said something about the aqueduct project in Zippori,” he sighed softly.

“Yeah,” Yoni replied. “Something about laying out an entire second course in three days without a break for food, drink, or

sleep. The rest of the crew came and went, trying to get Shueh to take a break, but he kept right at it. Not to mention that his work seemed to get better the longer he went.”

“What nobody understands is that the job needed to be done,” Shueh tried to defend himself. “Otherwise, we would have lost the contract for foundation work on a whole block of new homes.”

Yoni pulled himself up from slouching on his elbows and put an arm around Shueh’s shoulder. “Look at yourself Shueh. Knowledge, smarts, health, resilience, endurance. Do you really think you could have gotten that from Yousef’s seed? Gamaliel’s? As a matter of fact, the only person you really remind me of is Heracles. What’s your next stop after this, cleaning out all the caravansaries between here and Damascus?”

Shueh had to allow a wry smile after Yoni’s last remark. “Funny you should mention him, though,” he said softly. “Even he got some direction from the oracle at least, before he was made to perform his labors.”

Yoni hooted in reply. “Oh yes, and poor Shueh has never had any oracles to tell him who he is or what to do. In all his labors so far, he has never received a single intimation that he has the special favor of Adonai.”

Yoni sat up straight and began to number things off on his thumb and fingers. “One, your unborn cousin jumps to attention as soon as he felt your unborn presence in the room. Yeah, I get it, that’s a new one for you.” Holding up his index finger he continued. “Your mother tells your wife that when the time is right, she should tell you to come see your cousin. When was the time right? When the questions about your parentage could no longer remain unanswered, that’s when. And what did your cousin on the other side of Yordan ask you? I think that is clear.”

Now raising his third finger he went on. “On your way to come see me, you’re once more overcome with fear of what might happen, and like a fool camp out next to a road filled with highwaymen. And just as they’re about to slice you up and have their way with your pretty little wife, your wife’s old friend happens to show up with two trained killers in tow.”

Yoni brought his extended thumb and two fingers directly in front of Shueh’s face. “My knowledge of *Torah* is not even



fractionally as good as yours, but I know this: ‘*Al-pi shni edim, o al-pi shlosha-edim--yikum davar.*’ Can you translate that one, Andreas?”

Andreas slowly did his best. “At the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses, everything is settled?”

“Close enough,” Yoni allowed. “There are three signs written in golden letters across the sky: Adonai thinks Yeshueh is special. Adonai does things for Yeshueh that he doesn’t do for anyone else. These are only the three that I am familiar with. I assume you can fill in another three, six, or twelve?”

Yoni dropped his hand, returning it to his knees where he could pick at his knuckles, but kept his gaze locked on Shueh’s eyes. Yoni could see Shueh’s eyes register at least three more such divine interventions before his eyes closed and grudgingly gave himself over to remembering a few more.

“Yes, now that you make me number them, it becomes clearer,” Shueh admitted softly. “When they are all just scattered about in one’s memory, it is hard to make a pattern of them. But once you line them all up, it makes more sense.”

Before Shueh could even finish his sentence, however, Yoni had his own epiphany. His jaw dropped wide open, his eyelids gaped wide, and his open right palm slapped hard into his forehead.

Andreas, wary of Yoni’s antics, called him out. “Yoni, would you stop? This man has just admitted to something huge, and all you can do is make fun of him?”

“No,” Yoni mumbled. “No, this is something else.” He paused, opening both his hands below his face. “*Baruch Hashem!* Why have I never seen it before?”

Both Shueh and Andreas showed looks of surprise and concern. “What do you mean?” Andreas questioned him.

“Now I understand what Gavriel’s words really meant,” Yoni said in a loud voice. “He said I was ‘to make straight the way of the Lord, the *Mashiach*.’ I always thought that had something to do with clearing a path through tradition so the people could find their way to the Anointed One. Maybe it still does, but...” he paused, looking into their eyes excitedly, waiting for their comprehension. “Shueh, certainly you see it now!”

“To help the reluctant *Mashiach* line up everything in his past,” Shueh acknowledged. “So that he can turn around and see his future, who he really is.”

Yoni let out a whoop, and began to dance around, his left hand at his hip and his right hand gesticulating in the air. “*Baruch Hashem*,” he sang, over and over again. Andreas joined in, his hands trying to clap out the beat to a dance. The clapping sound disturbed the rookery of crows in their tree, causing them to break out in raucous calls.

“Oh, would you just go away, you ungodly creatures?” he called out to them. “Your timing is just awful!”

His surprise was total and his embarrassment excruciating when he heard, coming up over the crest of the hill from the *wadi*, the voice of Sara, his wife. “Andreas! How dare you!” She presently appeared, accompanied by Miri, both in a great hurry.

“*Yircham Hashem*,” mumbled Andreas, covering his face in shame and begging God for mercy. “I’m a dead man.”

Yoni, stopping his dance in mid-step, saw Shueh’s face. The mouth was pulled up in a lopsided grin, but the rest of his face continued to reflect some hidden reservation or concern. As the women neared, and Andreas ran to Sara to explain that he had been yelling at the crows, Yoni nudged Shueh’s arm with his elbow. “It all lines up now, does it not?” he asked, hopefully.

Shueh returned his gaze, his face finally melting into a complete smile. “Yes, Yoni, it all lines up. There are so many things, things you know, and many more that you do not. Our minds aren’t built to hold everything in remembrance all at once, and sometimes important things leak into the back of your head. You don’t forget them, they aren’t gone, but you forget to remember them. Every once in a while, you’ve got to rummage around in the back of your head and bring out all the dusty memories, line them up, and see what they mean. If you’ve done anything today, you’ve done that. You have done your job wonderfully.” He wanted to stop there. He wanted desperately for everything to line up clear as a burning bush. But there was still one nagging thought, a recent one that had never had time to migrate to the back of his head. “There is just one more thing...”

But before he could complete his sentence, Andreas was back and gesticulating again, while Sara and Miri were both

shouting. It was difficult for Yoni to make out what they were saying, but eventually he made out two messages. Soldiers were coming, and they needed to get out of here before the soldiers arrived.

## If the Thief be not Found Exodus 22:8

When the three men had finished their breakfast, they walked back up the street to the *sofet's* home. Along the way they passed Shem's home, and Ezra barked into the doorway "Thanks for breakfast and beers."

When they arrived at Matan's home, he was sitting on the bench by his door paring his nails. "Good day, Chaim. Good day Ezra," he murmured without looking up. He did not acknowledge Shar. "What is it that has brought me back into town so urgently that my date trees are yet thirsty? Another complaint about barking dogs?"

"I need to release this prisoner into your custody," Ezra said, indicating Shar.

Matan raised an eyebrow and looked up. "Prisoner?" he asked. "I don't see anyone bound."

"This is Shar," Ezra replied. "He has surrendered himself to us. He assaulted me last night."

"In your home?" Matan said, looking blankly at Shar.

"No, out in the valley the other side of the river," answered Ezra. Then, noting a question beginning to form on Matan's lips, he continued, "Yoni sent us out to find some stragglers from Yericho last night. We found them just before this man attacked them."

"Us?" Matan leveled his gaze back at Ezra. "You too, Chaim? And this one man attacked both of you?"

Chaim shook his head quickly, looking back to Ezra to answer.

"It was Andreas, Shem, and me," Ezra answered. "Shem-du, I mean."

"Did the man attack all three of you," Matan eyed Shar again, looking up and down his body. "And what about the party you went out to rescue? That makes at least four against one. I find it improbable that he would have attacked you in the first place. Much more like surrender, if you ask me."

"There was another attacker as well," Ezra admitted.

"And where is he?" Matan asked, raising his chin and revealing a thin neck with large Adam's apple under his sparse beard. "Dead? Ran off? I had heard there was a bound prisoner

with you last night in the sheep pen. Is this the same man, deciding he didn't need to be bound anymore?"

Ezra was embarrassed, and looked at the ground, trying to find a way to explain himself. But at that moment, Shem came trotting up the street. "What's this about breakfast?" he interrupted. "And who is this?" he asked, eyeing Shar warily. Then, looking back at Ezra, he backed off a little. "And why are you in town? Has Yoni purified you already? Man, I don't want to be near you if you're..." he trailed off, backing away a little and raising a hand.

Ezra puffed out his cheeks as he considered what to say. "This man," he gestured to Shar, "Is the man who attacked me last night." Looking to Shem, he sheepishly mumbled "The one I supposedly killed. But as you can see, he is alive, so I am not unclean. However, he did attack us, and so I am delivering him to the *sofet* for judgement."

"What about the man I captured?" Shem looked a little relieved, but still demanding. "What happened to him?"

Matan coughed and spoke from his bench. "Ah, so there were two attackers," he remarked knowingly. "Yes, Ezra, what did happen to him?"

"Somehow during the night, he freed himself from his bonds and escaped," Ezra looked cast down. "I'm guessing he lit out back to his cave south of Yericho. I went after him, but when I came up empty, I found Shar waiting at the edge of town, waiting to be arrested."

"Ah, now we come to the prisoner," Matan said airily. "You gave yourself up willingly and came here without bonds? Why did you not just run back to your own cave, *alub*?"

"I want to meet the man who saved me," was Shar's simple reply.

"Saved you?" asked Matan, looking very confused. "Someone saved *you*," he conjectured, "from these men, perhaps?"

Before Ezra could respond, he felt the presence of another man approach him from behind. "*Qui estis vos. Quae sunt nomina tua?*" he heard, but did not understand that the man was asking after their names.

Shem, turning to see a *Romim* officer with his hand clearly holding the hilt of his *gladius*, answered quickly, meekly, and efficiently, trying to explain who they were and what they were doing. “*Viri civitatis sumus cum latrone quem...*”

“*Nomina tua!*” the reply cut him off, as he knew that Shem could both understand and speak the Latin tongue.

Pointing to each man in the group, Shem said, “Matan, Ezra, Chaim,” then, forgetting the prisoner's name, looked to Ezra.

Ezra now understanding the interrogation, said “Shar and Shem,” looking as compliant as possible.

“Shemdu?” the officer asked.

Shem, a little disconcerted at hearing his nickname in the mouth of a *Romim*, nodded uncomfortably.

The officer looked Shar over, shook his head, then asked “Andras? Yuni?”

Before Shem could stop him, Chaim turned and pointed up the wadi to the hill.

With a flick of his fingers, the officer designated Ezra and Shem. From behind the corner of Matan's house and the house across the street, two soldiers suddenly appeared, each taking one of the designated men roughly by the shoulder. Their expert hands probed each man's clothing, producing Shar's *khinjar* tucked into Ezra's belt.

The officer clucked his tongue, reached out to take the weapon, and jerked a thumb over his shoulder. Before Ezra or Shem could say anything, they were being hurried down the road toward the ferry.

Chaim, realizing what he had done, raced up the street to Andreas' home. Matan heard much commotion from within and then saw Sara and what looked like a girl come bursting out, and go flying up the lane in a flurry of skirts and heels. Chaim came out a moment later, hustling past Matan and Shar toward the ferry.

Matan looked up at Shar, shrugged his shoulders, and shook his head. “What am I supposed to do with you now?”

Shar looked longingly up the hill, but said nothing.

“Why don't you come inside?” Matan finally said, slowly raising himself from his bench. “Perhaps my Hadas can brew you a cup of tea?”



## A Faithful Witness Does Not Lie Proverbs 14:5

“They arrested Ezra and Shem without asking any questions,” Sara was hastily explaining. “And what’s worse, Ezra was apparently carrying a wicked looking dagger. Just possessing one of those is illegal.”

“Oh, Shueh,” Miri moaned. “What is happening to us? First last night, and now this.”

“Whatever is happening,” Yoni said, “We shouldn’t be here to see it. We need to get out of here now. I recommend heading to the caves north of Beth-Abara. We’ll have to cross some rough country above the *wadi*, but there is another road that comes down to the caves before it comes to the town. I’ve got water and food there for at least a week.”

“Those caves are so close to town,” Andreas protested. “They’re bound to see us there.”

“But they’re in the wrong direction,” Yoni countered. “If outlaws flee, it is usually *away* from the scene of the crime.”

“Then you boys best get going right now,” Sara insisted. “Don’t mind us. We’ll head back down to the spring so when those boots see us, they won’t know we’ve been up here with you.”

Sara and Andreas embraced. “I will come for you as soon as I can,” Andreas assured her. Then he began walking swiftly across the hilltop for its northern defile. Yoni wanted to follow, but looked back to see Shueh standing with Miri.

“Say your goodbye and let’s get moving,” Yoni called.

Shueh shook his head, looking down at Miri who returned his gaze steadfastly. “No,” Shueh said. “Run if you like, but we will be staying.”

Sara rushed to Miri’s side, followed quickly by Yoni. “Girl, you don’t understand,” Sara almost shouted at Miri. “These are *Romim*. What they’ll do if they get you under arrest,” she shook her head, “you don’t even want to know.”

“We’ve done nothing wrong,” Miri said in response. “What have we got to fear?”

“It doesn’t matter if you’re as innocent as a lamb,” Sara retorted. “They’ll roast you and have you for lunch.”



Yoni was also trying to move Shueh in Andreas' direction. "It is best to avoid them whenever you can, even if you have nothing to hide."

"We've got nothing to hide," said Miri defiantly. "But we do have something to prove."

Sara looked at her questioningly. Then, suddenly remembering what Salome had whispered to her when she brought Miri back to Sara's home, she realized what Miri was saying. "You don't even know. You're not sure. Are you going to risk all this on a hunch?"

Shueh looked at Miri with an expression that asked if she had shared a secret. She returned his gaze with apologetically at first, but replaced it with a look of grim determination. "We came to Yoni. We crossed Yordan. We have to find the answer. We're not going to find it telling tales and hiding in caves."

Shueh looked up from Miri and caught Yoni's eyes. Her look of determination was mirrored on his face. "'*Am in ani lei mi lei vechshani le'atzmi meh ani ve'em le achsav imati?*'" he quoted.

Yoni looked down and chuckled wryly. "There is no retreat from such wise words."

"Why can't you ever quote anything in *Goy*?" Andreas asked, having just come back to the circle.

Yoni provided the translation. "If I am not for myself, who is for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?" The words of Hillel, Gamaliel's grandfather." Yoni gripped Shueh's shoulders from beside him. "Are you ready for this?"

As Shueh nodded his assent, Sara shook her head vigorously. "Well, maybe your magic man will find a way to get out of this, but Andreas? He's a good man, don't get me wrong. But he doesn't stand a chance with that *Romim* officer."

Andreas looked at Shueh with quiet desperation, his face begging to know what he should do.

"Want some *Goy*, Andreas?" Shueh asked. "*Gnothi sauton, file mou. Gnothi sauton.*"

Andreas humphed, shook his head, and said "If it was good enough for Socrates, I guess it needs to be good enough for me."

The rest of the circle looked at Andreas quizzically.

“Words written on the gates of the Oracle at Delphi that became Socrates’ theme in life: *Know thyself*,” Andreas explained. “It is the knowledge of oneself that sets him his place in the world.” He moved back over to the rocks and plopped himself down. “I’m as innocent as the rest of you. I’ll stay.”

Sara, looking at her husband, shook her head in acceptance, walked over and plunked down next to him. “He’s my man: Andros. Maybe more *goy* than *bnei Yisrael*, but I’m sticking with him.”

And so, they waited, standing and sitting, facing down the *wadi* as they awaited the arrival of the soldiers.



## Chapter 9

### Author's Notes

The Book of Joshua records that, after wandering in the desert for forty years, Joshua brought the children of Israel into the Promised Land by cross the River Jordan. Because the river was to ford, Joshua directed one elder from each of the twelve tribes to help bear the Ark of the Covenant into the river. As soon as their feet got wet, the waters of Jordan stood up in a heap upstream, leaving the streambed from there to the Dead Sea exposed for easy crossing. Because Beth-Abara means “house of crossing,” it is thought that this was the location where the Ark had been held.

The Second Book of Kings records that, after visiting Beth-el where a group of prophets predicted Elijah's imminent departure, Elijah and Elisha traveled to cross the same spot on the Jordan River. Upon arriving, Elijah took off his mantle, wrapped it in a roll, and struck the river waters with it. The result was the same as Joshua's Ark, allowing Elijah and Elisha to walk over the streambed without getting wet. Tradition holds that after they crossed, they walked another two miles or so to the top of what is today known as Elijah's Hill. Elisha reports that a whirlwind and a chariot of fire took Elijah up to heaven. To show that “the mantle had fallen,” on him, Elisha descended the hill and duplicated Elijah's miracle on the riverbed, showing those who had gathered there to watch Elijah's departure that Elisha was the new prophet.

Visitors to Bethany Beyond the Jordan, or Al-Maghtas, the purported spot of Jesus' baptism, are shown stone lined pools used for ritual bathing. The Jews called structures like these *mikveh*. The extant structures do not date back to the Second Temple period, but at least from Byzantian times. While tradition holds that Jesus was baptized in the river proper, it is not unlikely that John, who baptized many people, might have done so in a *mikveh* instead of the river. The Jordan is full of silt, not to mention other refuse from towns and villages upstream from Beth-Abara. The existing water systems at Al-Maghtas

indicate how such structures may have been fed with running water. The writer of the Didache, an early Christian instruction manual written before the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, recommends running water for baptism. Therefore I have chosen to have John perform his normal baptisms in his own personal *mikveh* instead of the river.

Characters introduced in this chapter include the following. Characters with an asterisk are based on historical people.

- An unnamed widow from Yericho
- \*Qayaffa, Caiaphus, the High Priest
- Rivka, The teenage girl from Yericho
- Semil, A former slave from Cush (Somalia)
- Yishach ben Mattani, A wealthy merchant from Yericho
- \*Yehoiakim, Purported by Christian tradition to be the name of Mary's father
- Zevulun, Rivka's father

## If You Will Not Believe, Surely You Shall Not Be Established Isaiah 7:9

When the soldiers came over the crest of the hill, they were puffing and flushed. They did not wear full parade uniform, but only a leather breastplate and skirts, and of course, a sword at the left hip. They instinctively grasped the sword's hilt as they tried to bark out orders between heaving breaths.

"Obviously not front-line troops," Yoni said under his breath. "These must be the soldiers of a quartermaster."

"A sword is a sword," Andreas countered. "Can you follow what they're saying?"

"All hail, Caesar, you peons," Sara muttered. "Grovel before our might. Is that about right?"

"They're looking for three men whose names sound something like ours," Shueh chuckled. "And they command us to return to town with them."

"How many languages do you understand?" Andreas asked incredulously.

"You don't work on *Romim* building projects for a decade without picking up Latin," Shueh answered. "You can also get jobs a little easier if they can communicate directly with you."

"It looks like they've said what they've come to say," Yoni noted. "Shall we, my friends?"

Andreas and Sara stood and clasped hands. Shueh pulled Miri close. Yoni put hands on both his friends' shoulders. They all proceeded toward the soldiers, who were in turn surprised at such acquiescent prisoners. They conducted their weapons search quickly but gently, but when they started to push the party down the path, Shueh took one of them by the hand and said "*Pax, amicae. Quiete veniemus*," assuring them that they would follow peacefully. The two shared a bewildered look, waited, and then followed as their prisoners walked quietly before them.

"*Tua nomine*?" Shueh asked over his shoulder a few paces later, wondering what their names were.

"*Nobis*?" one of them asked, pointing at himself and his colleague.

"No, the trees," Shueh muttered to himself. "*Etiam*."

“Eh,” murmured the taller one, not sure of himself. “Caius *vocor*,” he said haltingly.

“Lepidus,” responded the other.

Turning back to his friends, Shuah said “I am told we are being accompanied by one Caius,” he said pointing to the first, “and Lepidus,” he continued, designating the other. Turning over his shoulder once more, he said “Yeshueh *vocor*.” Taking his lead, each of the others gave their names to the soldiers.

As they came close to the spring, Shueh asked them if they were thirsty. Lepidus nodded vigorously, but Caius, still very careful, gave him a questioning look. Miri, knowing her size to be the least threatening, took the initiative and stooped to take up the cup that was always there. She filled it and walked slowly to Lepidus with the cup proffered in both hands. Lepidus, apparently being quite thirsty, threw his head back and quaffed the water in a single gulp. Miri took the cup back, refilled it, and offered it to Caius. His eyes shifted back and forth, making sure each of the men was not a threat, and then slowly sipped the water, keeping a keen eye showing over the cup’s rim. He wiped his beardless lip and returned the cup with a stolid face.

Sara then followed Miri’s lead, retrieved her own pitcher she had left at the spring, filled it, and offered it to him. Lepidus reached out for it, but Sara threw him a withering glance as she proffered it to Caius, having discerned that he outranked his cohort. Caius looked sternly at her, until she affected a modest look and a warm smile. His stern facade withered. He took the pitcher, put it to his lips, and abandoned himself in a long draught. When he had finished, there was plenty left for Lepidus, who gratefully drained the pitcher and handed it back to Sara. Caius then returned the courtesy, gestured toward the spring, and allowed each of the prisoners to quench their own thirst. There were laughs shared all around until they started down the path once more.

The women fell to chattering comfortably with each other, and Shueh heard the soldiers share a quip or two, choosing not to respond to their off-color remarks about the women. Soldiers would be soldiers. Andreas chose to walk close to his wife and listen to their banter, but Yoni sidled close to Shueh. “You said

there was one more thing. Did you answer that? Is that why you gave in so easily?"

"Oh no, it is not answered," Shueh acknowledged. "It still gnaws at me. But I guess I'll have to let it go. You have answered everything else so well, I would be foolish to let that one little thing stand in between me and the destiny you have pointed out. Something whispered to me up on the hill that I should just forget it for now. Put it on the back shelf of the workshop and let it gather dust for a while. Maybe it will be answered someday."

Yoni looked as if he wanted to say something more, but instead he picked at his knuckles and pursed his lips. Looking up in the sky, Shueh noted the noon-day sun was now being shaded by clouds rolling over the hills in the west. Perhaps it will rain this afternoon? The birds seemed to anticipate such an event and were roosting on branches more than they were flitting about. The smell of the river was now in his nostrils instead of the fresh hilltop breeze.

"So, my prophetic friend," Shueh asked after a long pause. "What is next for me? For us?"

"Looks to me as if we'll have a hearing with leader of these boots. Maybe the *sofet* will join in? I doubt it, though. He doesn't like to get involved with *Romim*. Best chance, we can explain our actions to the satisfaction of the officer, he'll get bored and let us go. If we pay him for his trouble, that is. You don't happen to have any coin on you, do you?"

"I actually have a gold piece or two that can testify for me," Shueh joked, punning the location where he kept them secreted.

"Ew," Yoni said in disgust. "Hopefully we won't need *those*. But that's best case. The other outcomes get progressively worse. I wouldn't be surprised if we end up in Yericho for a hearing."

"Yes, I can imagine," Shueh replied. "But that's not really what I was asking. I have no doubt that things will clear themselves up long before Yericho is on the agenda. What I really want to know is: what is next for me."

"Ah, you're asking me, Yochanan the preacher, what God wants you to do next," Yoni laughed. "Is that it?"

Shueh nodded his assent.



“The message that was given me to preach is simply this,” Yoni outlined. “Have faith in God, repent of your sins, and make a covenant with God in the waters of baptism to follow whatever he commands you to do.” His voice took on the ring of authority that accompanied his short interview with each baptismal candidate that came to him. “Do you have faith in Adonai, that he is the one and only God?”

“I think you know that, Yoni,” Shueh replied.

“Yes, I gathered that,” Yoni smiled, and then went on.

“What sins do you have to repent of?”

There was a long silence. It became uncomfortably long. The longer Yoni waited, the more he picked at his knuckles.

“Shueh,” he finally said. “What are your sins?”

Shueh held up his hands in front of him and shook his head. “Taking so long to come to you? Not listening to my wife when she first told me to come here?”

“Is that all you can come up with?” Yoni asked incredulously. “If so, neither of those is sinful. You waited for the right time, and despite camping out on the valley floor and attracting some riffraff, got yourself here.” He turned and eyed Shueh as carefully as he could as they walked alongside each other.

“I really can’t...” Shueh halted.

Yoni didn’t push him. Instead, he thoughtfully chewed his beard, the swallow’s wing of his chin beard pulsing up and down. “You don’t mean to tell me...” he considered aloud. “Yes, I get it now.” His hand clapped his forehead as he quickly shook his head. “The lamb without blemish. I always thought that just meant no physical deformities. I mean, look at you. There’s no deformity on you. But that’s not what it meant, all along.” He was silent as they began to pass houses and huts on the outskirts of town. “The lamb without blemish. Well, I guess that’s all there is to step two.”

“Thanks,” Shueh whispered. “That was not an easy thing for me to admit to myself, much less say aloud.”

“You are a marvel, my cousin.” Yoni admitted, waving to some of the children who came out to see the cavalcade. “Makes me wonder if I’m even the right guy to do step three. But let’s

wait to see if we get out of our pickle before we worry about dunking ourselves in the brine.”

## And They Stood Around Him from Morning Till Evening Exodus 18:13

When the party arrived at the *chatzer*, it was difficult to squeeze through the crowd to get to its center. Every child in town had abandoned their chores and were filtering through the legs of their elders to take a squatting position at the very front. Yoni could spot a dozen or so locals in the crowd, as well as a few looking down from the nearby roofs. The main crush was from a caravan that had just finished crossing the river and the small batch of pilgrims who had come out to hear Yoni's thrice weekly sermon. The crowd parted at the sound of Caius' and Lepidus' calls, allowing the party of captives to be herded through. The women, not being part of this man's world of legality, found their place squatting with the children, while the men were pushed to the center of the courtyard.

They found Ezra and Shem sitting cross legged next to the fire pit, their hands bound tightly in cords. On the far side of the pit sat the *Romim* officer, ensconced on a folding stool he appeared to have had brought with him. He had sliced an apricot in half and was trying to coax the stone from the flesh with his pointed dagger. Yoni could see from the small heap of stones that he had been waiting for a while.

Thankfully the glare of the sun had subsided with the arrival of the afternoon clouds, else the heat from the press of bodies in the stone courtyard would have been oppressive. Yoni and his companions were roughly invited to sit next to the bound men, their cordiality disappearing in front of their commanding officer. However, they were not bound. Yoni observed the officer as he finally extricated the pit from the fruit and dropped it on the heap. He then looked up, subjecting each of the new arrivals to an intense scrutiny. His eyes appeared hard and cold, but Yoni had to admit that much of that appearance was because the man's eyes were bright blue, an uncommon sight in this land of brown people. After being inspected, the officer returned to his newly pitted snack, biting it in half with teeth that he appeared to be exposing a bit gratuitously. Maybe this was one of the things the *romim* learned in their schools of oppression,

Yoni thought. Fill your captives with dread and fear by exposing dagger, tooth, soft flesh, and stones rattling like so many skulls. After the officer had wiped a bit of juice from his lip and rubbed it dry between his delicate fingertips, he barked a sudden and loud command over his right shoulder.

The command was relayed by another voice down by the river crossing, and a third voice could be heard in the village on the other side. Soon after this, a commotion could be heard. A door creaked open and then slammed, followed by a murmur of voices. Yoni could hear a few people board the ferry, after which came the slow creak of the ropes as the ferry cut across the slow waters of the river. At the same time the ferry bumped against the near pier, the tramp of feet could be heard coming up the curved path to the courtyard. Again, the crowd parted to reveal old Reuben with a snotty look on his face, a bland youth trembling with anxiety, and the freshly washed and newly clothed figure of the robber from last night, Basha.

A whisper blew through the crowd. Reuben and the youth were known, but who was this third person? He was obviously not one of the captives, not a defendant, so his late entry and honored appearance must mean he was the accuser. At the sight of him, Ezra had to reach out with his bound hands to keep Shem from jumping up and assaulting him. He could not, however, keep Shem from hurling a vile invective. "You filthy swine!" He cursed through gritted teeth. This outburst was met with a sudden and intense glower from the officer, followed by Caius delivering a backhanded blow across the back of Shem's head.

How had Basha come to be in the place of the accuser? He had been tied up with Ezra last night. Yoni could understand how the unclean Ezra could be here among the rest of the community, but how had he come to be here without the *gannab* in chains? He looked questioningly at Ezra, who mouthed the words "he escaped."

But how did he come to be the accuser in a *romim* court? Then Yoni sighed as he saw Reuben standing next to the *gannab*, making sure the wretch was presented positively, straightening the hem of his collar and adjusting the knot around his waist. The garment did not fit the robber properly, and Yoni guessed it actually belonged to the ferryman's assistant. Yoni sighed as he

began to put the pieces together. After escaping, the *gannab* had probably tried to flee over the river, commandeering the ferry in the early hours of the morning. The ferry's ferret-like night watchman would have caught him in the act. And being hostile to all residents of the eastern side of the town, he probably licked up Basha's story like milk from a saucer.

But why was a *romim* officer and his two boots here? There is no way Reuben could have summoned a tribunal from Yericho so quickly. He was stumped on this one for only a moment. Then he remembered the armed escort the ferry's owner had been sending with the courier who came from Yericho to collect the last two week's proceeds from Karon. Usually, Karon settled his accounts in the toll booth on the Yericho side of the river, so the courier and his military escort came and went without any notice on this side of the river. And that escort would not require frontline troops, but only a pair that would intimidate any would-be *gannabim* from making off with the strong box. Hence the bumbling duo of Caius and Lepidus. And the officer was probably overdue with his report already, hence the quick tribunal. Yoni didn't like it, but at least putting the clues in order in his head made sense of the confusing surroundings.

"That rat of a *gannab*," Yoni thought. "Maybe Andreas should have enacted swift justice on the wretch in the desert. It would have avoided all this." As Yoni focused back on Basha, he could see the robber looked scornfully down at Shem, obviously enjoying his position of superiority today after his humiliation last night. However, Yoni could also detect just the slightest bit of fear in Basha's stance. Yoni could tell by the motion of Basha's lips that he was about to spit on Shem's face when he was interrupted by several incomprehensible words from the officer. The youth bowed his head and then mumbled something that could not be heard. The officer then shouted a command even Yoni could understand: "*Plus, plus!*" The boy dutifully repeated what he had just said, only much louder this time.

"The accuser will state his case against the accused," he announced. The officer inclined his head and pointed to Basha with an open hand, inviting him to speak.

“As I told the officer before, last night me and my friend Shar was traveling to visit his poor, sick mother in Philadelphia,” Basha narrated, seeming to enjoy being the center of attention. “Along the way, he slipped and hurt his leg, making us spend the night out in the open, just about. After it got dark, we lit us a fire because it was getting cold. As we were sitting there, just warming our hands and minding our own business, all of a sudden, these four brutes jump us outta nowhere.” Basha pointed to each of the seated captives, excluding Yoni. “They had torches and knives. We begged ‘em to leave us alone. We didn’t have nothing worth stealing. But they poked poor old Shar with a torch, and Shar just pushes him back a little. Next thing you know they all pile on him and slice his throat with a dagger.”

The officer interrupted, and the youth interpreted. “Is this the dagger?”

The officer slowly raised the *khinjar* that the soldiers had found on Ezra when they arrested him. He turned it slowly, revealing its intricate engraved silver hilt, and then slowly drew the weapon. He picked up another *mishmesh* and effortlessly sliced it in half. The crowd murmured in appreciation of the theatrical display. This blade could definitely kill a man. He spoke again to the youth, who then explained “This weapon was found in possession of this man earlier today.” The officer pointed to Ezra and asked another question. “Do you deny it,” the youth asked in turn.

Yoni, along with Andreas and Shueh, looked questioningly at Ezra. They had never seen this blade before, nor was it a weapon of the type that Ezra would employ, if he even had one. It was obviously an import from further east and much too extravagant for a village man. But to their astonishment, Ezra just shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. He could not deny it.

The youth interpreted the next question asked by the officer. “Did this man kill your companion?”

Basha, taking his cue, joined in pointing at Ezra and affirmed “Sure is. He’s the man that sliced my Shar’s poor, innocent neck.”

The officer, wanting to keep the drama progressing at pace, skipped the youth and asked in his own pidgin, “and this man” as he pointed to Shem.

“Oh, he about near killed me,” Basha howled. “He kicks and beats me near to a pulp, then ties me up. I dunno why, but they tied me up. Guess they wanted to bring me back here and sell me as a slave to one of the convoys coming through.” Basha turned and glared down at Shem with an evil gloat, then suddenly remembering something, he practically shouted. “He had a *khinjar* too. Did you find it on him?”

This was apparently something the officer had not heard before, for he prompted the youth to translate Basha’s statement back to him. He asked Caius a question, to which the soldier shook his head. Caius then grunted at Lepidus, who looked to the officer for confirmation. The officer then spoke to the youth as he pulled a small coin from the purse at his waist. “This coin to the man who points out the accused’s home so it can be searched.” Yoni could tell that the reward offered was too small to interest any of the townsfolk into turning traitor, but as he was surveying them, he heard Reuben quickly volunteer for the task. He approached the officer, bowed with cupped hands, received his reward, and went scuttling off through the crowd with Lepidus in tow. Yoni saw Shem bury his head in his hands, and he knew that Shem had probably left the thing in plain sight, hoping to trade it for some dainty on the next caravan. How could he possibly have known it would become incriminating evidence?

After the crowd had closed back in and the murmur had quieted down, the officer got back to business. Pointing to Andreas, he asked “this man?”

“Oh, him?” Basha asked. “I guess you could say he was the worst one of all. He was the boss of the rest. He’s the one what told the other what to do. Keeps his own hands clean, but they’re the dirtiest of all.”

Yoni could see that Andreas was incensed by Basha’s lie, watching helplessly as he saw Andreas’ face contort and his mouth gape wide, wanting desperately to defend himself. Yoni also caught something in the corner of his eye. Chaim, who had been on Yochaved’s rooftop overseeing the entire calamity,

suddenly disappeared. Yoni could barely hear the clattering of his footsteps as he descended the ladder, apparently off on some important errand. Yoni had no idea where he could be going.

But now it was Yoni's own turn. The officer pointed at him and asked Basha to explain his role in this nightmarish fantasy. "He was waiting back here for all of 'em to report to. Maybe he's the one in charge? Anyway, he was the one that made me get all bound up and spend the night with Shar's murderer lurking over me all the time." Yoni was relieved that his role, although cast in an evil light, was not so far from the truth. But then again, this could work to his detriment, as the villagers could easily believe this about him.

Yoni heard a commotion at the back of the crowd and turned to see Reuben elbowing his way through them and shouting "I found it. I found it"

Lepidus followed him, holding up another, less elaborate, *khinjar* as if it were a dirty garment. He took it to the officer, who motioned for him to show it to Basha. Yoni saw Basha's hand reach out as if to take the weapon, but draw swiftly back and pick at his beard. It was his, and Yoni knew that he longed to have it back. But he had accused Shem of being its owner, so he had to part with it. He saw the regret in his eyes as he answered the officer's question. "Yes, that's the knife they tried to use on me."

The officer tutted and shook his head. Then he said a few sentences to the youth and sat back awaiting the translation to be delivered. "Be it known to all that the possession of such weapons by anyone except military personnel is..." The youth was obviously out of his depth and could not find the words for the next phrase.

Yoni was startled to hear the translation continue from right next to him. "Is a breach of Caesar's law and statute. It is punishable by imprisonment and/or death," rang out Shueh's clear voice. An audible gasp escaped the crowd. Death was on the table, for Ezra and Shem at the very least. Such a thing had never before happened in Beth-Abara. Even the visitors were dumbfounded. They had not been expecting such entertainment from this quiet village.



The officer let the drama of the moment play. Then he graciously acknowledged the presence of another one who spoke his language before pointing at Shueh and asking in his own tongue “et hic homo?” The youth did not translate, knowing everyone already understood he was saying “and this man.”

Basha took a minute before answering, probably going over the story he had made up in his head and reported to the officer earlier, making sure he didn’t deviate from the details. “This one is the robber,” Basha finally spat out. “Shar’s only possession was this pendant he had gotten from his poor, sick mother. It was the only thing he had to remember her by. Pretty little thing. Had a goddess carved in it. He rips it off of Shar’s dead and bleeding neck and stuffs it in his pocket,” he lied. “Well, before he pockets it, he shows it to his woman.” He began to scan the crowd for Miri, but since she was hardly bigger than a child and was squatting with the children, he could not locate her. “Anyway, I bet he still has it, unless she’s wearing it now,” Basha looked defiantly back at the officer.

The officer motioned to Caius to inspect Shueh, but as the soldier crouched next to him to begin the search, Shueh reached into the pouch at his waist and pulled the pendant out. Yoni caught a terrified look from Miri. Apparently, the robber had gotten this part of the story right. Yoni had no knowledge of the pendant himself, but obviously Miri had seen it.

The officer motioned Caius to give the pendant to Basha and asked in his pidgin “this is belong to Shar?”

Basha clutched at the precious thing, casting a short glance at it and then proclaiming “This was Shar’s poor mother’s. I will return it to her in memory of her son,” he sobbed. Yoni thought this *gannab* had missed his calling. He should have been in a traveling theater troupe.

The officer, taking his own cue to participate more fully in the drama, rose from his stool. “This man have jewel, is robber,” he said as he tapped Shueh on the head. “This man head bad man,” he awkwardly pronounced as he tapped on Andreas bowed head. “This mens have weapons not should have they, and likely murderers,” he fumbled to say as he slapped their foreheads. When he stood before Yoni, the two shared a long look. Yoni could sense that the officer was reluctant to pass

judgment on him, perhaps because Yoni was accused of being the organizer of this whole operation and was owed some professional courtesy from another commander. Finally, he pronounced, “not enough know this man. He be free.”

A tiny ripple of relief could be sensed among the crowd. But as the officer turned to the youth for a more complex translation, a shouting was heard coming down the street. Sensing a disturbance that might disrupt the finality of his court, the officer opted to speak quickly himself. “To Yericho...” was all he was able to utter before the crowd shouted and parted. Bursting through them came Chaim dragging a man Yoni did not know, followed by a puffing Matan.

Three things happened in such quick succession that Yoni was swept away in complete confusion. First, Basha shrieked in complete and utter terror as he pulled Reuben in front of him. he yelled in a tongue from which Yoni could only understand the words “dead” and “ghost.” Second, the stranger broke into sudden tears and prostrated himself before Shueh, exclaiming “My Lord, my Lord” in words only slightly different from Yoni’s own tongue. The third event was the most confusing. Yoni watched as Shueh’s face completely melted in emotion. He reached out and cradled the prostrated man’s forehead in both his hands, kissed the back of his head and sobbed “Oh God, my blessed Father.”

## See, Thy Son Liveth 1 Kings 17:23

It was a long time before the officer could regain the order of his court. Basha cowered and shrieked incessantly and even tried to weave his way through the crowd. He was detained, however, by two men and one large boy from the caravan. They might not know everything that was going on, but it was clear that one of the key players should not suddenly disappear. Shueh and the newly introduced stranger could not be kept from clutching each other, nor could Miri be restrained from embracing her husband, almost riding upon his back. Ezra was gesticulating at the officer, demanding to be heard. Shem was trying to get someone to undo his bound hands as he kept an eye on Basha, obviously intent on doing the robber deathly harm. Andreas was standing, blinking like an owl in daylight, while Sara covered him with hugs and kisses and questions. The soldiers darted to and fro, grabbing people about shoulders, demanding order in words the hearers did not understand. The crowd was an incoherent mob of questions, accusations, explanations, and astonishment all at the same time.

Finally, the officer drew his sword, clanged it several times against the wall of an adjoining house, and hollered “*Silentium! Silentium! Si-len-ti-um!*”

Almost at once, the crowd followed his order and were silent. The only sounds remaining were the ceaseless murmuring of the stranger and Basha’s whimpering sobs.

The officer, recognizing something about Matan’s stance, queried him first. “Who you?”

Matan, having no Latin himself and not knowing interpreters were near, replied in simple words, “Village head man.”

The officer nodded, then pointed at the figure prostrate before Shueh. “Who he?”

Matan’s response produced an immediate gasp in all but Ezra and Shem, who stood nodding their heads with open mouths and gaping eyes as if to communicate that it was obvious. “He is Shar.”

The officer’s jaw opened halfway as he cocked his head to look at the prostrate man, then at Basha, and finally at Ezra. “Shar not dead?” he finally asked. When Shar emphatically

shook his head that he was *not* dead, the officer said “*Venis*,” beckoning for him to rise and step forward.

Shar raised his head and saw the officer motioning to him. He looked back at Shueh, as if asking permission to leave, and then slowly stood, and stepped before the officer. Shueh also rose, wiping his cheeks, and stood beside Shar. “*Loqueris*,” the officer commanded him to talk, demanding nothing, but only that he speak.

Even Basha fell silent as Shar spoke. His words were echoed by Shueh in Latin so the officer would not miss a single word or meaning.

“I was Shar. I was a thief, a robber, and a murderer. My companion, the man over there, Basha, we went out into the night to rob and kill this man,” he spoke slowly and deliberately, indicating Shueh at the last phrase, “and his woman,” he added, nodding toward Miri. “Just as we were ready to attack them, these three men appeared, as if from nowhere. I attacked this one,” he said, pointing to Ezra, who closed his eyes and silently exhaled as his case was exonerated. “We fought. He is a good fighter, much better than me. My *khinjar* fell from my hand, and he struck me in my head with the end of his staff,” he said as he felt at his right temple. “I was gone. I don’t know how to say it, but I know that I was no longer alive. I was flying through darkness on my way to a very, very bad place.” He paused as a look of horror crossed his face. When he could speak again, he said “But then I heard this man’s voice,” pointing at Shueh. “He called me back. I don’t know how, but I flew back. I saw me. I saw my body. I saw it dead on the ground, a hole in its head and blood all over. But I felt pulled back into the body. When I woke up, there was still blood on the ground, but my head,” he paused again, touching the temple and shaking his head, “my head was injured no more. He healed me. He called me back from being dead.”

A murmur that had slowly been building in the crowd suddenly erupted as a woman from the group of pilgrims shrieked and then fell in a faint.

The officer, although amazed, was not dumbfounded. Looking to retain control of the proceedings, called for the daggers supposedly belonging to Ezra and Shem to be brought

forth. He held up the first, more ornate one. "This yours?" he queried.

"Yes, this is my *khinjar*," he said readily. "I gave it to Ezra when I met him this morning at the edge of the village. I wanted to find this man," again indicating Shueh, "and Ezra said he would take me to him."

"This yours also?" he asked as he held up the smaller, plainer one.

"No, this belongs to Basha," he replied, looking over to his erstwhile companion. "I do not know how you have it."

The officer took slowly inhaled a very deep breath, the let out a streak of incomprehensible curses as he looked at the ground, raising his hand in Basha's direction and beckoning him sharply with his fingers.

Basha did not want to come, but Reuben, sensing that he had fallen far out of favor with the officer, tried to curry some remaining favor as he grabbed Basha and pulled him forward.

"*Dabis mihi pendentem*," he commanded, reaching his hand out for the pendant. Basha clutched it in both hands, causing the officer to have to reach out and rip it from his hands. Before passing it to Shar to confirm his ownership, he decided to look at it first. His initial curiosity was slowly replaced with a look of recognition, then surprise, and finally complete disdain as he looked at Basha and closed his hand upon the gem. "You," he uttered in his pidgin. "You are thief. *You* are robber." He held up the pendant between his thumb and forefinger, displaying it for all to see. "This belongs my Fausta. My girl."

Shar raised a finger toward the officer, perhaps wanting to correct him. But Shueh gently captured Shar's hand in his, pushing it back down and whispering "He has not asked you," into his ear.

The officer grabbed Basha by his neck and shook him as he spat in his face. "These go free," he motioned with the hand that still held the pendant, as if the grace of the goddess engraved upon it was strewn over them. "You," he spat again, forming a fist around the amulet and punching Basha square in his unprotected face, distributing both his own and divine wrath. "You, with me to Yericho. There you die."

As the crowd erupted into spontaneous applause, Caius grabbed Basha's wrists and began expertly throwing loops about them. Lepidus, taking his own initiative, pulled his dagger and relieved Ezra and Shem of their own bonds. He also had the sense to keep a hold on Shem's arm as he released him, as Shem lunged toward Basha, exploding in another stream of putrid invective.

The crowd opened wide to give the soldiers a way to drag the writhing Basha down to the ferry. The officer remained for a moment more, taking a moment to ceremoniously shake hands with Matan, to show he was returning the town to him. He also stopped and regarded Yoni again, acknowledging their kinship, but this time with more respect. Then he looked back at Shueh and Shar, both of whom were caught up in the embrace of Miri. Pointing at Shueh, he asked Yoni "*Quis est ille?*" But then realizing he had no interpreter, he said "Who is he?"

"I'm not entirely sure," Yoni shrugged. "But I think we're about to find out."

The officer shook his head, not understanding, and then followed his soldiers through the crowd down to the ferry.

## A Reed Shaken with The Wind? Matthew 11:7

As the crowd dispersed, the children being driven by their parents back to their evening chores, the townsfolk back to their homes, and their caravan back on the road and straggling up the *wadi*, Yoni spoke a few words to the pilgrims who had come out to hear him preach. He would attend to them in a short while, but he had some obvious business to attend to first.

He pulled Shueh and Miri with him into a corner of the hostel. Shar, of course, could not be separated from them, so he came too. Yochaved stepped over to inquire about refreshments, but Yoni waved her away.

"Out there, a while ago," Yoni began. "You called out to 'Father.' Would you be so kind to tell me exactly whom you were addressing?"

Shueh smiled warmly and deeply, and playfully ruffled Shar's hair across the table. "Remember how I told you that there was one remaining issue that was gnawing at me? Well, it was Shar."

"How?" Yoni held up both hands pleading for understanding. "Why Shar?"

"As he has explained so well," Shueh responded, "He was dead. That is how I found him. I knelt beside him and was overcome with grief. A few minutes ago, that poor man had been alive, but because of my ill-begotten doubts, he had been drawn out into the night. Because I needed protection by you and your gang of near convicts," he interrupted himself with a wry laugh. But instantly pulled back to his grief, he looked across the table at Shar and continued "Because of them, this man was dead."

"But it was not your fault," Miri soothed as she petted his hands.

"His life was not my fault," Shueh admitted. "But his death was because of me. That weighed very heavily upon me as I knelt at his side. But then, as if by someone else's direction, something outside of me, I felt my hands moving toward his head. I didn't want to do it. Heaven knows I didn't want to touch a dead body and become unclean like Ezra. No matter how hard I willed, something overruled my will, and I found my hands near his head. Then I found myself commanding him to arise."

Shueh shook his head and looked at his hands, turning them in and out before his face. "Yoni, for all the world it felt like God was telling me to raise this man from the dead. To be like Elijah! Me, little Shueh from Natzrat. Raise a man from the dead? But there it was, and I said it."

A long pause ensued. Coming unbidden, Yochaved silently slid small cups of wine in front of each of the four. "On the house," she murmured as she retreated. Yoni absentmindedly sipped his while he waited for Shueh to continue.

"But nothing happened," he finally muttered. "Nothing at all. If I was who I have been thinking I am, if it was God speaking to my soul and commanding me to do such great things, then he should have bounded right up. But he didn't." More silence. Then "So I caught up with the rest of the party and came here. Here for Yoni to answer my questions."

He sipped at his own cup as he considered his next statement. Wiping his lips he went on. "Up on the hill, you put everything into perspective. Everything lined up. Things I had forgotten came back to my memory. It was perfectly clear. If I could just look past this one discrepancy, this one little fly in the ointment, I could go forward. I could follow you into Jordan and take up Elijah's mantle on the other side. I decided to do it. I decided to fulfill the mission of the *Mashiach*, even though I had no idea how to do it. And I was at peace with it."

Another sip of wine, and this time he tasted and appreciated it. "But then, mayhem. I'm taken to court and accused of being a thief. I'm just about to be marched to Yericho in chains, but all the while I'm not doubting for one moment that something will happen. But then, who should appear? Shar. Shar the beautiful. Shar the intact. Shar the living." The two smiled at each other across the table.

"You know how it is when you've had an exceptionally bad day at work," Shueh continued. "Everything has gone wrong. It's not your fault, you've done your best, and you haven't gotten mad at anyone, and you realize that tomorrow is another day. Things will probably be just fine when you get back to work. But then you walk in the door, and your wife has laid out your favorite supper. Slow roasted beans and a very lean cut of mutton with browned onions and mushrooms," he turned and



smiled at Miri, who bowed her head and smiled. “She doesn’t know it, but it is exactly what you needed to keep going. Such a small and tender mercy. But it means everything.”

Shueh looked up at the ceiling, not seeing the beams and cracked plaster, but gazing far beyond it. “God did want Shar to live. He wanted his death not to be on my hands or my shoulders. He tested me to do something I did not know how to do. And then, just for a moment, he tested me again, to accept His will despite my lingering doubt. And as soon as I did, as soon as I came home from work without chewing anyone’s head off, he swoops in with a batch of the sweetest, tastiest morsels I’ve ever eaten. At my hand, because of my trust, my faith, Shar lives.

“At that moment, all doubt was swept away from my mind. What being can there possibly be in the universe who knows me so well? Who knows the child better than its father? Who can see so deeply into a private affair of which no one in the world has any inkling, and clear it all out so completely? And who can do it all with the exact timing to let me know that this was the final step? This was the keystone to the barrel vault that is my life. And it snapped into place perfectly. This divine being, this God, is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-loving. But most importantly, he’s not just some divine being. He is my Father.”

“I feel something,” Miri said confidently. “Do you feel it? It’s like a warm blanket on a winter’s night.”

“It is like a tasty liquor warming me from the inside,” Shar murmured, putting his hand to his breast.

“That, my friends, is the witness of God,” Yoni explained with great satisfaction. “That’s what I tell my disciples they should try to feel every day. And here you all are, practically burning up with it without me even saying anything.”

Each of them became silent, as they all sipped at their wine, savoring both the fruit of the vine and the peace that came from drinking it together.

“But speaking of my disciples,” Yoni broke the silence, “I have a few new ones to convert. Will you come with me to today’s synagogue?”

As they filed out the door past their hostess, Shueh pulled a coin from his pouch. "May your house bring peace to many distressed souls," he said as he pressed it into her hand, despite her protestations.

The ground was damp, spattered with dark spots in the dust where large raindrops had fallen. A few fell on them as they made the short walk back to the courtyard, where Andreas was doing his best to keep the pilgrims' attention while awaiting the *rav*. The dozen or so people in the group were holding their shawls above their heads to ward off the rain drops. Yoni looked the group over, sizing them up to tailor his message for the day. There were two widows, one of them not that old. He spotted a merchant, noting the extra embroidery on his tunic. A trio of day laborers with calloused hands joked together, having brought out mugs of beer from the hostel. They were obviously here for some entertainment. A middle-aged couple with their teenage daughter were off to one side, sharing some nuts in a basket the mother held. Next to them stood a younger couple, the mother cradling an infant and the father trying to keep the three-year-old boy entertained with a game of stones on the pavement. A foreigner with a shaved head, probably a freed slave, sat at attention on the low stone wall. But standing in the forefront, feeling their own importance, were a couple of well-fed and luxuriously dressed priests.

Yoni bowed and shook hands first with the priests, deferring to their feelings of primacy. From them he moved on to the widows, offering words of comfort and support. He lightheartedly asked the teenage girl whether she had come of her own accord, or whether her *abia* had forced her to come. The girl's rolling eyes told a familiar story. But the mother offered to share some of the nuts from the basket. Yoni politely took one. When he greeted the workers, he feigned offense, wondering where his beer was, and then laughed with them as he slapped one on the back. He shared a simple "Shalom" with the merchant and "Salaam" with the foreigner and then knelt with the three-year-old, pretending to pull a stone from behind his ear, and then smiling up at the gracious parents.

Shueh, Miri, and Shar had squatted next to Andreas as he had retreated to make way for Yoni. They watched intently as

Yoni interacted with each individual or family, nodding or laughing appropriately with each interaction.

With greetings finished, Yoni stepped back from the group a few paces, inviting them to seat themselves as he folded his legs beneath him. Shueh was surprised by this approach. He had envisioned a more dynamic delivery with pacing, gesticulation, and vociferous preaching.

“And what brings you this long way today?” he asked the merchant. “Are you here on business, or are you on another errand?”

“Truth to tell, it was business that brought me to Yericho,” he responded confidently. “But it was there that I heard of you. I thought it might be interesting.”

“And you three,” he turned to the day laborers. “How did you get the day off, and why did you decide to spend it here?”

The smallest of the group was their spokesman. “The boss is waitin’ for a shipment from Sela. Since there ain’t nothing we can do while we wait for it, he sent us out here to make sure it arrives safe and sound.” His buddies nodded their heads vigorously in support. “Thought we’d take in some local flavor while we’re here,” he added, raising his mug in salute.

“I hope each of you finds enjoyment here in Beth-Abara. Make sure you try the marinated chicken at Yochaved’s,” Yoni commented as he pointed his thumb over his shoulder. Then he turned to those he felt had come for a deeper purpose. “My mothers, I grieve for your loss. How can I ease your burdens today?” he asked of the widows.

They looked at each other, a bit startled to be addressed with such kindness. The younger one was too shy to speak, but the older responded readily. “We struggle with so many things. My own support dwindles as I outlive my husband’s legacy.”

Pointing to her companion, she said “And the magistrates have not yet granted her her husband’s legacy, even after almost two years.” The younger woman nodded desperately. “As hard as that is, what hurts the most is feeling like you’re not really a person anymore. Half of your life is stripped away to begin with, and then, because you don’t fit in anymore, the other half just kind of withers away.”

Yoni tried to find words to say, but knowing that she still had things to be heard, he kept his tongue.

“Is God done with us too?” she wondered. “Are we only meant to be an *ezer* for them in life, and when their life is over, we are discarded?”

“The prophet Shmuel raised a stone, giving thanks to Adonai for help defeating the Plishtim,” Yoni said. “He called it *eben-ezer*, the stone of help. That stone probably stands still, but has been forgotten to all but the sun and the rain. I’m certain the stone feels the same way as you do.” He paused as the women nodded their assent, the younger one wiping a tear from her cheek. “But there is another stone,” he continued, “One set up by our father Yakov after he used it as his pillow. This stone was anointed to witness the coming and going of angels. This stone we know and revere to this day.” Yoni stood and crossed to the widows, taking each of them by the hand. “Witness anew today that you have heard the footsteps of angels and then go forth and stand as witnesses of Adonai’s love. Then he will anoint you with oil, bread, and wine.”

Turning to the foreigner as he sat back down in his spot on the pavement, he said “Brother, do you understand our words?”

“Most,” the man grunted. “When slowly you speak.”

“Tell me,” Yoni asked with sincere interest, “Where were you born?”

“I am Semil from land you name Cush,” he replied proudly. “I was slave for many years.”

“Why are you here?” asked Yoni.

“Yehudi people speak of great man coming,” Semil spoke slowly, trying to remember unfamiliar words. “I hear he come soon. I seek him. People here,” he said, pointing vaguely toward Yericho, “say you say of him. Do you?”

“He may be closer than we think,” Yoni replied, raising his eyebrows in Shueh’s direction. “But whether he walks down our street during our lifetime is not the only way he is near. We do not know the day or the hour that we will die and be brought to him. We must always be prepared to meet him.”

Semil’s face was still confused. “What I must do?”

"You must learn of him and his ways," he said automatically while his eye drifted to the merchant. "Do you hear *Torah* and keep *shabbat*?" he asked him.

"Why, of course," he stammered in surprise. "Yes, I do every week."

"I thought so," Yoni replied. "Can you make a new friend today and take Semil with you to synagogue?" It was not the right time for these two to go down into the *mikveh*, but the merchant could use the spiritual rejuvenation that naturally comes from leading another to the truth.

"Semil, may I introduce you to..." he said, looking hopefully at the merchant.

"Yishach," he answered, reaching forth his hand. "Yishach ben Mattani." Semil rose to shake Yichah's hand, then set back down and patted the wall next to him. The merchant took a seat and Yoni noticed that he began listening more attentively.

Not seeing any real entertainment value in this personalized preaching, the three-day laborers took this opportunity to excuse themselves, quietly heading back into the hostel to refill their mugs.

Yoni continued his message by asking the father of the younger family and the mother of the couple with the teenager why they had come. The young father complained of a *rav* who read *Torah* and collected tithes, but really had no other engagement, leaving their growing family spiritually adrift. Yoni asked whether the father had taken the time to communicate that to his *rav*. The father, a little abashed, admitted that he hadn't, not knowing that was something he could do. "Pester him with questions," had responded. "Make him think. Perhaps he just thinks everyone is sleeping. If he knows you're awake, maybe he'll wake up too." The teenager's mother expressed concern that their daughter was not making any efforts to live up to the strict standard as had her older brothers. "Is she the same person as her brothers?" Yoni had asked pointedly. "Were you exactly like your older sister?" The mother conceded the point. "Is your daughter good?" Yoni had asked. Her father nodded that she was. "Take joy in the good things your daughter does," Yoni had recommended. "And you, daughter, don't have to be as good as your big brother," he cautioned the teenager, "but you must obey

your parents and honor them. A father who is well pleased will find his daughter a better husband." At the mention of a husband, the teenager's eyes finally met his, and they didn't instantly roll away. The slightest of nods followed, and her father's hand gently caressed her shoulder.

"And finally, my esteemed brethren," Yoni turned his attention to the priests, giving them the honor of the final place. But the tone he used with them startled Shueh and Miri. "Who sent you all the way out here to this miserable little crossroads, you old snakes. Come to snatch a few eggs out of the nest?" There was venom in Yoni's voice. "Or are you here to report back to Qayaffa?"

"Why, you impudent little upstart," one of them protested.

"Oh no you don't," Yoni interrupted him, rising to his feet and holding out his hand. "You can keep it. This is my town. You have no place or authority here. You have no interest in what I have to say, unless it cuts into your own business." He looked over the rest of the group. "Has any one of you ever received a visit or a kind word from men like this?" he asked loudly. While none dared to respond, Yoni answered for them. "No! The only time the likes of them darken anyone's door is when they suspect you of something nefarious that might deprive them of a single *lepta*."

This infuriated the priests. "You sad, miserable outcast! You're nothing but a bloody rag," they shouted at him. "What will you say when you're dragged before the high priest?"

"Ha!" snorted Yoni. "How are you going to get me there? Did you bring any boots with you? Let me tell you, I just... We just..." Yoni thought better than to explain something they had all seen earlier that day. He stopped for a moment to regain his composure.

"I apologize to the rest of you for them," he bowed slightly, "but rest assured, there we have something here for all of you today, even of interest to you two," he said dismissively of the priests. "I have brought a special guest to speak a few words to you. Let me say first that I am proud to be his cousin, or rather than his mother is the daughter of Yehoyakim, my mother's brother. But more than that, he is a wise man, a gifted teacher,

and..." Yoni was ready to go on to say more, but Shueh rose instantly and shushed him.

"Yoni," Shueh protested. "What do you want me to say?"

"These people have come to hear Adonai's will," Yoni said. "Some of them will want to do more than that. Some of them will want to make a new start, just like you have come to do. Tell them your story. Tell them what you plan to do."

And so, Yoni retreated to squat next to Andreas, jabbing him in the shoulder with his elbow with a glance that said "this is gonna be good!" Shueh seated himself in Yoni's spot. He looked around to each member of the group. Then he looked over his shoulder at Miri, who blew him a kiss.

"My name is Yeshueh ben Yousef miBeit Yehouda of Natzrat," he started. He told them of his childhood; of praying for his baby sister Marta and her miraculous recovery; of visiting Yerushalayim at Pasha; of being left behind and learning at the temple school. He told them of his mother, how beautiful and good she was, but how she was treated by others. When he explained the cause of her ill treatment, he admitted for the first time in public that he was not the fruit of Yousef's loins, but that he loved the father of his childhood with all his heart, and how he thought his mother was still beyond reproach. He touched briefly on his work; how although it was merely working with stone, the most basic of all elements, he could feel the power of the Creator in His handiwork, and how he always strived to bring out the beauty of creation in his work. He spoke of coming to know of the word of God through his weekly attendance at synagogue, and even chanted two of his favorite psalms, word for word, in a quavering baritone.

Then he motioned for Miri to join him. She hesitantly came to him and nestled under his arm. He related the wonder of their meeting; the joy of their wedding; and the affection of their relationship. But he also spoke of the heartbreak of her miscarriage and subsequent barrenness. He reminded her of the words he had been prompted to say that brought her out of the deep chasm into which her soul had fallen and reminded her that she would someday see the purpose in her lack of children. Then he praised her in turn for the words she had prayed at his side after the death of Yousef. He extolled her courage and

determination to bring him here, to learn at the feet of Yoni, whom he considered something of a prophet, exactly what he should do with his life.

“Yochanan ben Zekharyah has looked into my past and shown me how the hand of Adonai has blessed and prospered me, even though I could not see it as it happened,” Shueh explained. “He has prepared my way, making the path that I should walk plain and strait before me. He says that this is the first step on the path. We all must believe in God, that he loves us, and that he knows what is best for us. The second step is to admit before God all our weaknesses, shortcomings, and evil deeds. Having done this, and wanting to make a new beginning, we should enter a covenant with him, in the eyes of all those around us.”

He turned to the priests, who, despite their earlier prickliness, were now listening intently. “Normally we do this as a group under the guidance of priests, who perform sacrifices on our behalf. Those priests must purify themselves before offering up the sacrifices. This is the way God ordained it. But just like you feel a little distant from your *rav*,” he said to the young father, “and just like you feel the necessity of approaching God more closely,” he said to the Cushite, “we now have a way of entering a new covenant, a personal one. We too, just regular stone masons, merchants, mothers, widows, and slaves, can descend into the water and be drawn forth again. We can be cleansed from our old selves and come forth for a new beginning in life.”

He looked back at Yoni and saw him and Andreas smiling and nodding. This was indeed a good sermon. There would be more than a few converts today.

Shueh started to wrap it up. “I believe with all my heart that my Heavenly Father loves me and wants me to follow in his way. I want to enter into a covenant with Him. I invite all you who feel the same way to come with me, to be baptized and purified by water.”

With that, he and Miri stood and exchanged places with Yoni. Yoni, however, did not sit back down. He raised his hands and prayed a psalm, reciting it not in the language of the *Torah*, but in the tongue of the people.



*I waited patiently for Adonai, and He inclined unto me, and  
 heard my cry.  
 He brought me up out of the tumultuous pit.  
 Out of the miry clay and set my foot upon a rock.  
 He hath put a new song in my mouth, even praise unto Adonai.  
 Sacrifice and meal offering Thou has no delight in.  
 Burnt-offering and sin-offering has Thou not required.  
 I delight to do Thy will, O my God; yea, Thy law is in my  
 inmost parts.  
 I have preached righteousness in the great congregation,  
 Lo, I did not refrain my lips; Adonai, Thou knowest.*

“I invite all those who want to enter into a covenant to start anew to follow me. We have our own *mikveh* up this way,” Yoni said pointing to some trees further up the road. “In case you’re worried, it is pure running water from the seven springs of the *wadi*. And we can provide you with suitable garments and towels, so you need not worry about getting your own clothing wet. And if you elect not to participate, I still invite you to come and watch those who do, so they can have witnesses.”

With that, the group looked about at each other doubtfully. The young widow and the teenage daughter, however, did not await further invitation. They stepped out from the courtyard and followed Andreas, who was leading the way. The rest fell into line and followed.

About fifty paces up the road Andreas turned right on a path between two buildings. It led back downhill for a short distance where another courtyard appeared. There was a deep pool, edged and lined with stones, with steep steps descending from one side. A rivulet of water gurgled at the other side of the pool, constantly filling it with fresh water. There were also two huts fashioned from reeds on either side of the courtyard. Sara was waiting at the one to the left, while Andreas walked to the one on the right. The teenager and young widow, obviously intent on participating, were directed by Sara into her hut, while Andreas pulled back the reed screen to admit Shueh to his hut.

Yoni, who had done this so many times, pulled his tunic over his head to reveal a clean, white one-piece garment bisected by a thick leather belt. The garment was not underwear, as evidenced by the belt. The merchant, having an eye for detail, looked over Yoni’s newly revealed attire with curiosity. “Camel wool,” Yoni

boasted to the merchant. "A little scratchy, but it sheds water like a duck's back." When the merchant pointed to the belt with a raised eyebrow, Yoni put his hands to the small of his back and explained, "Hurt my back once hefting a big one out of the water. A cinch on this belt reminds me to stand up the right way."

Yoni descended into the water, puffing a little to get used to the cold. The others found seats on palm logs that had been placed about the courtyard. Shueh was the first one out of the hut. He was clothed in a garment similar to Yoni's, but it was baggy and less form fitting. He looked over to Miri and raised an eyebrow in question, then shifted his gaze to the women's changing hut. She put her fingers to her breast with a quizzical look. Shueh inclined his head, then held up his forefinger and middle finger spread widely apart. Slowly he brought the fingers together and intertwined them and brought them to his lips. She blushed, turned, and let herself into the women's changing hut.

The group waited in silence, except for the young boy who wanted to inspect the pool of water. Yoni motioned him forward and had him sit and dangle his bare feet in the cool water. The boy splashed and giggled in delight. His giggles were echoed from the women's hut, and soon all three women appeared, all clothed in the same baptismal garment. The giggles were because Miri was practically swallowed up by hers, with hands and feet barely exposed.

The teenager decided she wanted to be first. Yoni held out his hand to help her into the pool, while she bravely shivered and spluttered into the cold water. When she had reached bottom and was bouncing and dancing about to keep warm, Yoni asked her name and her father's name. Then, putting his left arm about her shoulders and raising his right hand to heaven, he called out "Rivka bat Zevulun, you covenant in the name of Adonai that you are willing to follow his ways all the days of your life?" He looked to her for a response. After she nodded her head, he looked high above the trees and said, "I baptize you in the name of Adonai to be free of all stain, that you may follow in His ways." Looking back down, he lowered his hand, placed it on her right shoulder, and gently lowered her backwards into the water. A look of terror filled her eyes as her face began to go

under, but Yoni smiled to reassure her, plugged her nose for her, and dipped her quickly under. Coming out of the water, she gasped and wiped her eyes. Then she raised both her arms, both hands clasped in triumphant fists, and squeaked a squeal of delight.

Sara held a generous towel at the water's edge for her, and Yoni averted his gaze as she climbed out of the pool and was wrapped in the towel. Sara led her to an empty seat and then helped the young widow into the water. The same process was repeated, except the woman's reaction was not triumph. She was overcome with emotion as tears erupted on her wet face. She clung to Yoni and sobbed. He returned her embrace for a short moment, then extricated himself from her clutches and handed her off to Sara's waiting towel.

But before Miri could descend into the water, Shar jumped up from his seat. "I want to do it," he sobbed, his face also wet with tears, "But I have been a very bad man. I have done horrible things. My Yara! Oh Yara, can you forgive me?" He fell to his knees, his hands clasped before him. He crawled to Shueh and clutched at his knees. "I am so sorry. I don't know what to do. I want to go on, but Yara. Oh my poor Yara. How can I ever be forgiven?" He succumbed to deep, wracking sobs.

Shueh lowered himself to his knees and raised Shar up from the ground. He smoothed his hair and patted his shoulder. "Yoni," he called. "How deep are the waters of your *mikveh*? Are they deep enough to find Yara's forgiveness as well as God's?"

"The water is deep enough, my friend," Yoni responded. "Andreas, help the man get ready."

"But how?" Shar begged.

"God forgives you," Shueh assured him. "I forgive you."

Yoni heard a sharp sound, almost like a hiss, that came from where the two priests were standing, somewhat aloof from the rest. One of them had a finger raised as if he wanted to make a point, but the other had laid a hand on his shoulder and was shaking his head at his comrade, begging him not to intrude.

Shar was overcome by even deeper sobs, but he allowed Andreas to help him up and into the changing hut. While he was changing, Miri descended into the water. The water threatened to

engulf her, with only her chin valiantly treading above water. Yoni could do nothing else but catch her about the waist and raise her a few inches higher. He already knew her name and lineage, so Yoni skipped directly to the affirmation, the prayer, and a gentle easing her straight into the water without any back bending. She came out of the water smiling radiantly, practically hopping from the pool into Sara's embrace, and then bouncing to Shueh's side.

Yoni motioned to Shueh, but he put up his hand and pointed to where Shar was just emerging from the hut. A hopeful light shone in his tear-stained eyes. He trembled as he walked to the water's edge, where Andreas grasped his hand and helped him into the water. After Yoni put his arm around him, he asked Shar's full name.

Shar looked up at Shueh, remembering what he had vowed to say to him when he had set off running down the road toward the river. "I was Shar. But no longer." He paused as tears burst anew from his eyes. "I am yours."

"Very well," Yoni concluded. "You will now be known as Shelyeshu'a. That is how you say 'I am of Yeshueh' in our tongue."

After Yoni brought him out of water, the newly minted Shelyeshu'a bounded up the stairs, whisked past Andreas' waiting towel, and leaped up on a palm stump. He extended his open hands as high as he could, stood on his tiptoes and let out a deafening, wordless ululation. To Yoni it sounded like the blood-curdling attack of a shrieking horde of desert raiders, and the children and priests certainly recoiled as if it had been. The other witnesses however, even one of the priests, having seen the man's transformation, found themselves shouting with him.

## Thou Art My Beloved Son Mark 1:11

When the celebration had finally ceased, Yoni motioned to Shueh to descend into the water. But Shueh hesitated. Miri tried to playfully shove him toward the pool, but Shueh stood his ground. Yoni cautiously spoke from the pool, “You’re not having second thoughts, are you, my cousin?”

“Oh, definitely not,” Shueh responded quickly. “But I’m wondering about a change in venue?”

“We don’t have any other *mikvaot*,” Yoni answered, a bit mystified.

“But you have an entire river,” Shueh countered.

“That sewer?” Yoni gasped. “You’ll be covered in leeches. You’ll catch dysentery.”

“As will you, my cousin,” Shueh pointed out. “But can you do it, just this once. Just for me?”

Yoni looked up at Andreas and Sara, who both shrugged back at him. “I guess,” Yoni gave in.

“Then let’s get these folks changed back into dry clothes and head down to the river,” Miri chimed in.

It took a bit longer for the newly baptized to change back into their regular clothes, as the towels were not able to remove all the moisture, and wet ankles are hard to push through dry clothing. While they were changing the young family, the merchant, and the Cushite disappeared down the path, having seen what they came to see. But when all had finally assembled, and Andreas had Shueh’s clothes and a towel in his arms, the remaining party started back up the path. When they passed the hostel, the teenage girl and her parents, as well as the two widows, begged leave to find a room for the night.

When they got down to the riverbank, the priests moved on to board the waiting ferry. One priest turned around as if to say something to them, but he was quickly detained by the other priest. “No Yusef, we need not trouble ourselves with them. We must return as quickly as possible to make our report.”

Yoni looked like he was about to offer a tart retort when Sara came up behind him and clapped her hand firmly about his jaw. “You’d have need of baptism yourself if you had said what I thought you were going to say.”

And so it was, as the sun appeared from below the rainclouds over the western hills, Shueh saw these, the few that would witness his baptism, cast long shadows behind them as they sought for a place to enter the river. "Why do you want it to be in the river?" he heard Yoni ask as they picked through the grass and reeds.

"Well, didn't you say it was here that Yeshua and *bnei Yisrael* crossed Yordan on dry ground into the promised land?" Shueh asked.

"Beth-Abara means house of crossing, so this must have been the crossing site," Yoni admitted.

"And was it not here," Shueh continued, "that the cloak of Eliyahu worked its double miracle, parting the waters twice?"

"Again, tradition is strongly in favor of that," Yoni concluded.

"Well, it seems to me if *Mashiach* has to begin his journey amid the waters, there are no waters more appropriate than these," Shueh said, pulling Miri close.

"Well, I'm glad it's *Mashiach* and not me," Miri said, wrinkling her nose at the rank smell of the somewhat rancid river.

Yoni had stopped and clutched his hands together again, cocking his head as if in thought. His eyes suddenly brightened as he said "That's right. The third leg!"

Shueh was confused, but Andreas volunteered, "He has spoken a couple times about the two great events that took place here, and that would even things out if there had been three instead."

"This isn't a bad idea," Yoni added as he sharply clapped his hands together. "It is inspired!"

Andreas had located a way through the rushes. He handed the clothing and towels back to Sara and then made himself a handrail for Yoni and Shueh to slip through the slime and into the riverbed, where deep mud silted over smooth stones.

No sooner had they gotten wet up to their hips than Yoni put a hand to Shueh's shoulder to stop him from going further. "A minute," he sighed.

"Locusts you'll eat whole, but you're afraid of a leech or two?" Shueh chuckled, sensing Yoni's unease at something.

“No, it’s something else,” Yoni explained, looking back at the riverbank. After a pause he asked “Shueh, how do you think Yeshua felt when he was about to cross? Maybe he thought ‘Who am I to do this? This should have been Moshe. I’m not the right person.’”

“And you wonder how little Yoni of Beth-Abara could possibly be equal to Yeshua and Eliyahu, right?” Shueh asked kindly. When Yoni didn’t answer, Shueh put a hand to his bearded cheek and said “Cousin, in my eyes, you’re even greater than they were. You can and should be the one to do this.”

As they turned and picked their way to find a section of just the right depth, Yoni asked quietly, “How about you? Are you absolutely sure about all of this?”

“Don’t tempt me, you devil,” Shueh said playfully, but with just a hint of real anger. “As sure as I am that the sun is going to rise tomorrow? No. That will come, hopefully.” He looked back at Miri, her face shining in the direct rays of the setting sun. “When we choose to marry, do we know that we will end up growing old together?” Then he looked back at Yoni, his face darkened by the flaring sun behind him. “We choose to act in good faith, that’s how we know it will work.” Then, having arrived at a slightly deeper spot in the river with good footing, he said, “And here it is, just the right spot.”

Shueh looked to the west where each day ended. The sun tinged the bottoms of the rain clouds over the river valley pink, while the haze further over the receding hills was orange mixed with the deepening blue of the evening sky. *Ma’adim* and *Tzedek*, the brightest of the wandering stars, were aligned like tiny red embers amid their white neighbors. He remembered seeing hundreds of such sunsets from his hilltop home in Natrat, sitting with his father by his shed, chipping away at some small stones; under the bean trellis, helping his mother clean and cut vegetables; and on long walks with Miri.

Remembering her, he turned back to the east, where the brown faces of his wife and his three witnesses glowed with a reddish light. Over their heads the leaves of the willows, palms, and tamarisks beamed a deep green as they bobbed to and fro in the evening breeze. East, Shueh thought, where Eden lay, the direction of new beginnings. But as his eyes strayed up from the

trees, he saw the deepening purple of gathering night in the gaps behind the dark gray clouds. He was chilled by the thought of the unknown that lay beyond these warm waters. But just as he was about to lower his gaze, the sight of a single star smote his heart. That was *Ro'eh*, the shepherd. Perhaps he too would be guided through the dark.

Yoni put his left arm behind his back, clasping Shueh's left shoulder. He raised his right hand slightly above his head with fingers close together and thumb extended. His voice deepened somewhat and became resonant, so much that Shueh could hear a slight echo coming from the banks. "Yeshueh of Natzrat," he began. Shueh noted that he did not include the patronymic. "You covenant in the name of Adonai that you are willing to follow his ways all the days of your life?"

"Yes," Shueh said very quietly.

"I baptize you in the name of Adonai, that you may follow in His ways," Yoni sonorously pronounced, leaving out any mention of sin or stain.

His right hand came down and was placed firmly on Shueh's right shoulder. Under their pressure, Shueh bent his knees and arched his back. The warm waters of Yordan rushed in his ears, reminding him of his cleansing dips in the baths at Pella. For a moment Yoni held him still under the waters, and Shueh could hear the pops and bubbles of the air leaving his ears and a slight swishing sound from the water flowing past their bodies. Perhaps this was how a baby felt in the womb?

Then Yoni's strong arms pulled him back out of the water in a rush of sound and sparkles of light as he opened his eyes amid the falling droplets of water. Shueh raised his hand to his forehead and pinched the water from about his eyes. He looked over to Yoni, who wore a magnificent smile. Shueh was just loosening his lips to speak when he suddenly stopped.

The river bottom suddenly dropped away. Shueh felt as if he was instantly floating in a dazzlingly white expanse of the creamiest, sweetest milk ever known. His limbs were weightless. His clothing no longer clung to his skin. He couldn't even feel the brush of his beard on his lips or the tickle of the hair on his brow. But suddenly he felt the warmth of something on his right shoulder. He looked down to see a hand. He knew it was a hand,



although it was not like any hand he had ever seen. Its touch filled him with a power like light being pumped into his entire body. He turned, but it was as if his body did not follow; as if he turned to look through the back of his head. And there he saw the loveliest eyes, the most gentle smile, the most beautiful face he had ever seen. It wasn't new to him. He remembered it. He remembered being by the side of that face and those hands through unknown ages. But before he could remember any more, the lips of the smile parted, and he was enveloped in words that he could not so much understand as simply feel and know.

"You are my beloved son."

Each word was a fountain of molten gold, pouring over him and encasing him in warm brilliance.

Me. Yeshueh of Natrat. He is speaking to me. He knows me.

I am. I exist. I live and breathe and move with endless power.

His. God's. Elohim's. The eternal.

Loved. Adored. Cherished.

He is my Father. No doubt. No shame. No mystery.

He was overcome. He was unable to experience any more. He wanted to capture every part of this. He felt his eyes closing and the sense of his body returning to him as he fell forward into the arms of eternity.

He was caught by the strong, brown, hairy arms of Yoni. But as Shueh turned to look up at him, Yoni was not looking at him. His eyes were staring into the sky above Shueh's head, and slowly descending. Shueh watched his eyes until they came to rest on his own right shoulder. He looked, and there, where just a moment ago had rested the most glorious hand in the universe, now perched a luxuriantly white dove. From its feet Shueh felt the same flowing power of light and warmth, penetrating to his very core. He looked about him as this now somewhat foreign world came back into focus, instantly intuiting that his vision of eternity was over. He would see it no more for a long time. But in this world of forms and grating, harsh reality, he could remember the glory of heaven by the feeling in his heart.

He turned to face Yoni, feeling the firmness of the rocks beneath his feet and the sliminess of the mud through his toes.

"Did you see it?" he asked breathlessly.

"The bird?" Yoni asked incredulously as it gently took wing again and flew straight up into the clouds.

"No," Shueh blinked. "Did you see Him?"

For an instant a question touched on Yoni's eyes, but instantly it was replaced with understanding, and again with wonder. "You saw Him?"

Shueh could only nod dumbly. "But you heard Him, didn't you?" Shueh was suddenly filled with an aching, bitter loneliness. He had been with Him for only a fraction of a moment. And now he was gone. Where had been the pulsating presence of his being was a hollow, empty core. And if he had been the only one to experience it, what then?

But before his doubt could even begin to take shape, Yoni's voice crept into his ear. "Yes, I heard Him too."

They turned to face each other in silent wonder. Smiles were not able to contain the joy. Hugs could not press deeply enough to touch the emotion. Soul to soul they looked into each other's eyes, as love, trust, and understanding bloomed.

"Oh my God!" Yoni suddenly gasped. "I'm standing in the Yarden. I'm standing where Yeshueh placed the holy Ark. I'm standing where Eliyahu's cloak parted the waters. I'm standing in the Yarden with, with..." Yoni's put forth a finger and gently touched Shueh's breast. "With the Son of God!"

"And with the prophet worthy of bearing the ark and taking up Elijah's mantle," Shueh said as he removed Yoni's finger from his breast and pressed him in a long embrace.

Arm in arm they navigated the slippery rocks back to the shore, where strong and willing hands helped pull them up onto the bank. Miri rushed to Shueh, jumping into his waiting arms and wrapping her legs about him, caring not a whit what the others thought of this affectionate display.

Shueh pulled his head back from hers and began to open his mouth to explain. But she put a finger to his lips. "I'm your wife! Do you think I didn't hear Him too?" Understanding broke suddenly across his eyes. "And I don't care whose son you are,

you are my husband too.” Any further talk was smothered in a long and passionate kiss.

“What just happened?” Andreas asked, his mouth gaping and eyes wide. “Did you all hear something?”

“Yes, we did, my boy. Yes, we did,” Yoni said as he reached out to grab him by the ears and pull his forehead close.

“But what was it? What did it say? Who said it?” Andreas shouted as he tried to pull himself free from Yoni’s hands. He looked over to Shueh and Miri for an answer but dropped his eyes in respect. “But who said what?” Andreas persisted.

Then a voice came from behind him. It was Shar, or Shelyeshu’a as he was now to be known. Andreas had forgotten him in the excitement. “If you didn’t hear it, it wasn’t for you to hear,” he said tersely.

Sara, shaking her head in wonder, said. “But whatever it was, it made those two happy.”

“It was the best thing they could ever have heard, and from the only person who could have said it to them,” Yoni agreed.

“But who said it?” Andreas whined. “I don’t see anyone else here.”

Yoni grabbed him by the nose, focused his dark eyes ferociously on Andreas’, and put the index finger of his other hand to his pursed lips. Then he let go of his nose, paused a beat, and slowly lifted his index finger to heaven. Andreas’ eyes shot open even wider.

“Do you mean?” he started.

Yoni cut him short with a sharp gesture of his hand. Then he turned to look at the couple as they knelt in the rushes, clutching each other, lost in silent tears of joy.

Pulling Andreas close to him again, Yoni said, “Look Andreas, and see *Mashiach*, the Lamb of God. It is he that will take away the sins of all the world.”

## THE BEGINNING