

Songs of the Well-beloved - Book II

Steal Away



a novel

Mahir ben Eitan

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List of Characters

- Adan, Adam
- Adinah, wife of Gamaliel ben Shimon
- Aitan ben Elchanan of Menasheh, elder at Secacah
- *Andreas ben Yona of Kfar Nahum, Andrew the Apostle
- *Aristotelets, Aristotle
- Ava, Eve
- Aviva of Beth-Hakerem, Yoni's wife
- Avram (Ram), son of Yoni and Aviva
- *El'azar ben Hanan, High Priest from 16-17 CE
- Eliyahu, The prophet Elijah
- *Gamaliel ben Shimon (the Elder), President of the Sanhedrin early 1st century CE
- *Hanan ben Seth, High Priest from 6-15 CE
- *Herodos Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee and Perea
- *Herodos HaGadol, Herod the Great
- Hillel HaSava, Hillel the Elder
- Kaiser, Julius Caesar
- Kedem, a servant in Secacah
- Malak Achav, King Ahab who persecuted the prophet Elijah
- Menachem ben Shahar of Giv'on, Master from Secacah
- Miryam (Miri) bat Tzedek of Migdal Nunayya, Jesus' wife
- Moshe, The prophet Moses
- *Pelaton, Plato
- *Qayyafa, (Caiaphas) the High Priest
- *Rachav, Rahab of Jericho who hid Joshua's spies
- Reuben, secretary to Qayaffa
- *Schlomo, King Solomon
- Shelyeshu'a (Shel) of Philadelphia, Jesus' manservant
- *Shimon ben Gamaliel, President of the Sanhedrin after his father until 70 CD
- *Shimshon, Sampson
- Shlomo ben Nachman of Hevron, a Sadducee
- *Shoshannah, (Susanna) a woman who contributed to Jesus' finances
- Tikvah (Tiki) and Tehilah (Tilla), serving girls at the tavern
- *Tzaduk, Zadok, the High Priest of Solomon

- *Yeshueh (Shueh) ben Yousef of Natzrat, Jesus
- *Yochanan (Yoni) ben Zekharyah of Jerusalem, John the Baptist
- Yochaved, the proprietor of the tavern in Beth-Abara
- *Yousef ben Qayaffa , (Caiaphas) High Priest from 18-36 CE
- *Yousef ben Shimon of Ramathaim-Zophim, a Pharisee

* Characters based on historical persons

List of Place Names

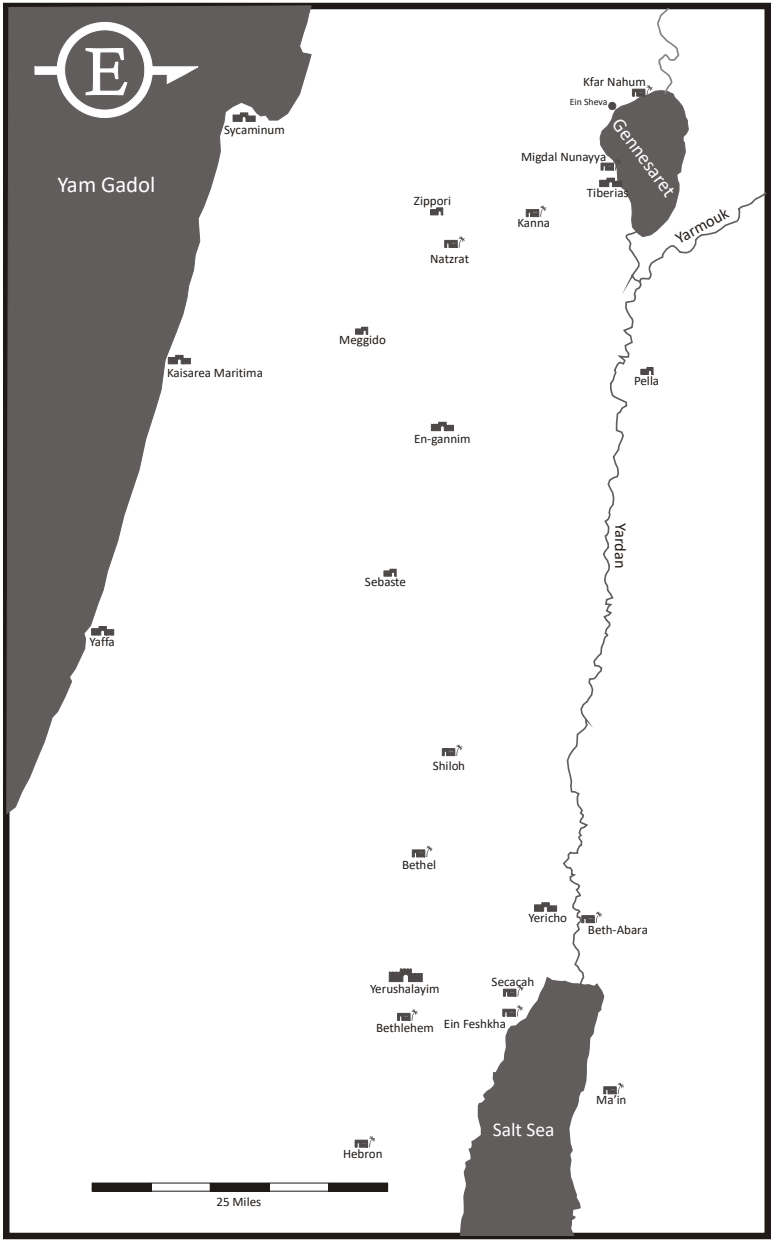
- Adn = The Garden of Eden
- Aleksandriya = Alexandria, Egypt
- Baris = Fortress Antonia
- Beit Chesda = Bethesda Pool
- Brechat HaShiloah = Pool of Siloam in Jerusalem, Israel
- Britannia = British Isles
- Cush = Ethiopia
- Dimashq = Damascus, Syria
- Ein Feshkha = Einot Tzukim, near Qumran on the shores of the Dead Sea
- Ein Gedi = Biblical En Gedi, a spring near the south of the Dead Sea, Israel
- Ein Ma'in = Hot springs on the Dead Sea, Jordan
- Gennesaret = Sea of Galilee, Israel
- Har HaBayit = The temple mount
- Har HaTzofim = Mount Scopus
- Har HaZeitim = The Mount of Olives
- Har Nevo = Mount Nebo, Jordan
- Har Nevo = Mount Nebo, Jordan
- Hodu = India
- Kypros = a castle built just above Herod's Winter Palace on the back road to Jerusalem.
- Ma'aleh Adummim, the Red Ascent, the road leading from Jordan Valley up to Jerusalem.
- Makhôr = The fortress Macaerus, Jordan
- Mitzrayim = Egypt
- Partiyah = Parthia, or Iran
- Salt Sea = Dead Sea
- Secacah = Qumran, Israel
- Sela = Petra, Jordan
- Sinim = China
- Tel Mar Eliyahu = Elijah's Hill, Israel
- Zippori = Sepphora, Israel

Glossary of Foreign Words

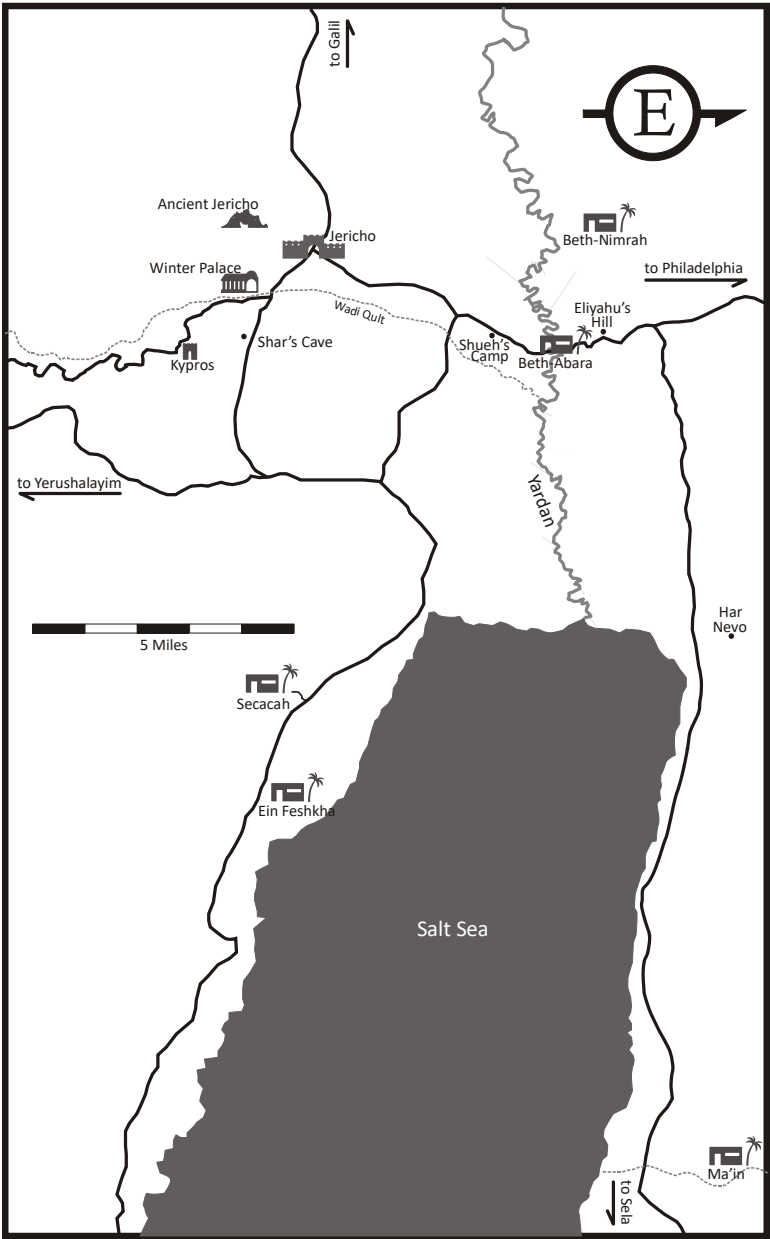
- Abia*: Father
Adon: Master in Hebrew
Aron HaBrit: Ark of the Covenant
Arubta: The day of preparation, Friday
Bar Mitzvah: Male coming of age ceremony
Ba'ali: My husband
Bnei Yisrael: Children of Israel
Bris: Circumcision ceremony
Chaver: Friend
Devarim: Deuteronomy
Eikhah: Lamentations
Ezer: Help or Assistant
Ganab/Ganabim: Robber/Robbers
Gamada: Dwarf
Golem/Glamim: Monster/Monsters
Goy/Goyim: Greek/Greeks
Ha'aretz: Land or country
Ḥabasa: Abyssinian
HaGadol: The Great
HaG'virah: My Lady
HaSava: The Elder
Hashmona'im: The Hasmoneans, Jewish self-rule before Rome
Ima: Mother
Kana'im: Zealots
Keffiyeh: head covering
Keruvim: Cherubim
Ketuvim: Section of the Bible containing non-prophetic writings
Kodesh ha'kodashi: Holy of Holies
Kohen gadol: High Priest
Kohelet: Ecclesiastes
Kokhavim: stars and planets
Mal'akh: messenger or angel
Maqabi: The Maccabeans
Maran: Our Lord in Aramaic
Mashiach: Messiah, or The Anointed One
Matzah: Unleavened bread
Mazla tava: Congratulations

Mezuzah: Ornament on doorpost of Jewish homes
miBeit: Of the house of
Midyani: Midianites
Mikveh: Pool or cistern for ceremonial washing
Mishkan: The Tabernacle in Shiloh
Nasi: President of the Sanhedrin
Nevi'im: Section of the Bible containing prophetic writings
Orvie: Either crow or desert dweller
Perush/Perushim: Pharisee/Pharisees
Pirutsa: Prostitute
Rav/Ravvi/Ravvoni: Master/Masters/My Master
Reqe: Jerks or worthless fools
Rom/Romim: Roman/Romans
Ru'ach: Spirit
Rut: Ruth
Saraph'im: fiery, flying serpents
Sayyidati: My Lady in Arabic
Shabbat: Sabbath
Shaitan: Satan in Arabic
Shavuot: Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost
Shequl: Reject or outcast
Sherutim: Outhouse
Shir Hashirim: Song of Solomon
Sh'neim asar: "The Twelve", or books of the minor prophets
Shomer/Shomrim: Levitical militia who guard the temple
Soreg: Fence or balustrade
Tabula: A Roman game of strategy and chance
Talata: Tuesday
Talmid: Schoolboy
Tav: Hey
Tevet: Ark
Torah: The Five Books of Moses
Triclinium: A collection of three couches arranged for dining
Tzaduk/Tzadukim: Sadducee/Sadducees
Yad: A pointing stick for reading scripture
Yehudi: Jews
Vayikra: Leviticus
Wadi: Canyon or wash

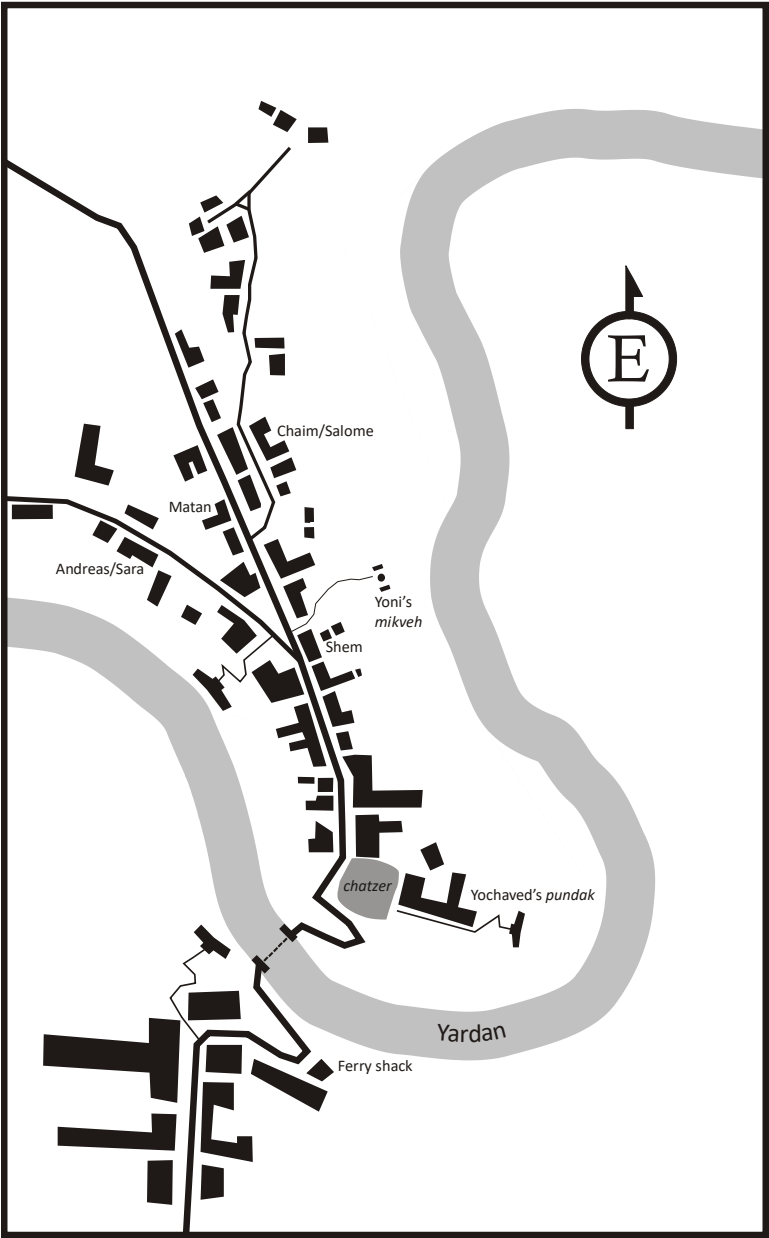
Eretz Yisrael



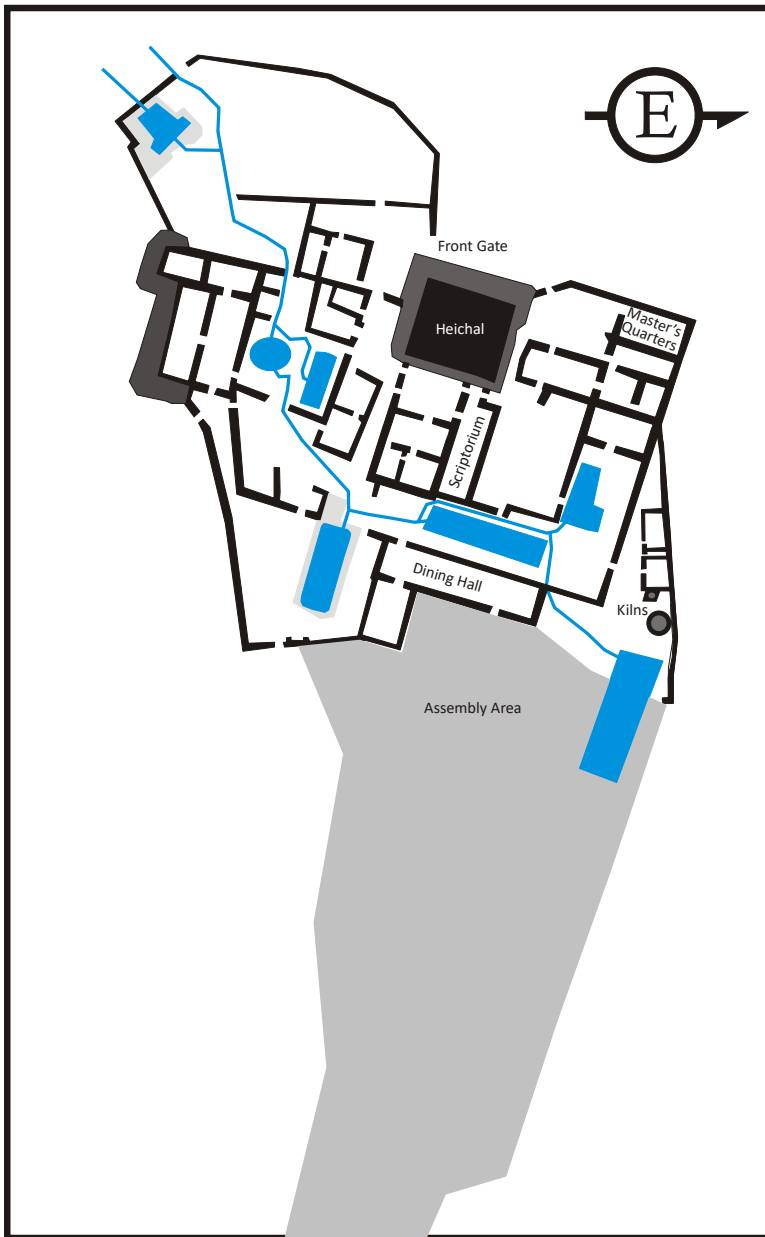
Yordan River Valley



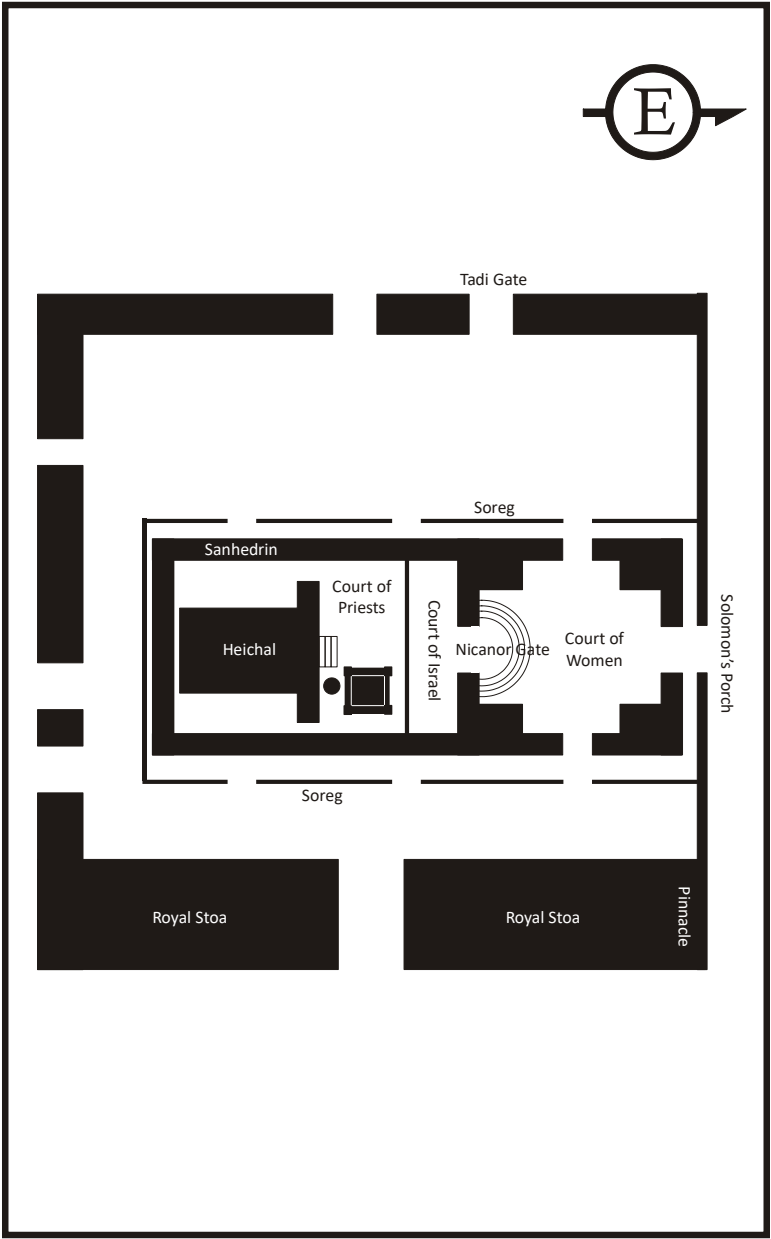
Beth-Abara



Secacah



Har HaBayit



Chapter 1

Author's Notes

This book picks up about a week following the previous book's events, when "Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Prior to writing this book, when I imagined Jesus going into the wilderness to fast and pray for forty days, my mind's eye saw him continuing east from the Jordan. In my research, however, I discovered on the other side of Elijah's Hill a lush land, land that had been given to the tribe of Gad, and which was probably both populated and cultivated. The closest area that can be designated wilderness are the hills and mountains rising to the east of the Dead (Salt) Sea. I have placed Jesus' place of solitude just northeast of the Ma'in hot springs, about a dozen miles south of Beth-Abara.

Jesus is said to have fasted and prayed for forty days and forty nights, slightly longer than a month. Muslims participate in a month-long fast called *Ramadan*. While the Jewish fast of Yom Kippur involves complete abstinence from food, water, and sexual relations for twenty-five hours, the Muslim fast involves abstinence only for daylight hours. Since these books treat Jesus as God living in a mortal body, I have opted to align Jesus' forty days fast with the practice of *Ramadan*, allowing him to eat and drink after sunset.

The temple in Jerusalem was run by a highborn class of men known as Sadducees. This term is an anglicization of Tzadukim, which has its roots in the name Zadok (or Zedek, as vowels are not actually written, but interpolated), perhaps referring to Malak Zadik (King Zadok), or Melchizedek of both Hebrew Bible and Paul's Epistles. Their counterparts were the *Perushim* (meaning "those who separate"), or Pharisees. While there were certainly *Perushim* present at the temple, it is believed that these men were of a somewhat lower class, and mostly worked among the people in its towns and villages. There were doctrinal differences between the two (for example, Jesus chided the *Tzadukim* for not believing in the resurrection), their main point of contention was how the temple and its rituals were conducted.

The year that King Herod the Great died (circa 4 BC), there were at least three revolts against Rome that involved self-proclaimed Messiahs. *Judas, son of Hezekiah*, led a revolt in Sepphoris, Galilee, attacking the royal armory and gathering a following, but was quickly suppressed by Roman forces. *Simon of Peraea*, a former slave of Herod, gathered a following in Perea and even crowned himself king. He was eventually defeated by the Roman governor of Syria, Quinctilius Varus. *Athronges the Shepherd*, whose impressive physique and the support of his four brothers, declared himself king and led a band of armed men against Herod Archelaus (Herod's son) and the Romans. Their rebellion lasted for some time and posed a significant challenge. Ten years later (c. 6 CE), *Judas the Galilean* led a revolt against Roman taxation and authority, calling for self-rule under God. He is often considered the founder of the Zealot movement. It is therefore easy to see how the common Jews at the time of Jesus were looking for military deliverance from Rome, as this was the recurring example. It is also easy to see why Jews in leadership positions, such as temple Sadducees, might be quick to investigate anyone who claimed Messianic authority, as such claims had four times out of four led to bloodshed and disappointment.

The chapters in this book are prefixed with the Jewish date. I have placed Jesus' baptism on 22 Nisan. Generally the Jewish calendar has 30-day months alternating with 29-day months. Nisan has 30 days, while Iyyar has 29, followed by a 30-day month of Sivan. These three months can roughly be aligned with April, May, and June in the Roman calendar.

In Biblical times Jesus spoke of feeling things in his bowels, not in his heart. Today's use of the word "bowels" usually has to do with the lower intestine, and makes Jesus' phrases about "bowels being filled with mercy" seem a little icky. Were we to translate "bowels" as "inward parts", we might be drawn more to the center of our thorax, as were people of earlier years, before the Renaissance taught us that the organ that pumped our blood somehow was the center of emotion.

2 Iyyar - Look now toward heaven, and count the stars

Genesis 15:5

Shueh leaned back against the little rock face, still warm from the heat of the day, but now in the shadow of the massif above him as the sun descended behind it. The dusty brown hillocks with their clumps of cream colored crumbling rocks gave way to blue-gray hills that rose ever higher in mounds and slopes to the east, eventually reaching up to Har Nevo. Light gray clouds mottled with patches of darker gray covered most of the sky as they flowed from the distant ocean toward the eastern wilderness. Eliyahu should be descending from the heavens at any time now, but it was hard to catch a glimpse of his descent amid the flowing clouds. It was always just an hour before sunset that the winged messenger came to visit him. Though each day was full of revelation and learning, it was Eliyahu's visit that made him smile. He thought he saw motion just below the ridge of the conical peak to the northeast. Instinctively, even though the sun was not in his face, he raised a hand to shield his gaze. Perhaps this helped his eyes to focus. Yes, that was him. That was Eliyahu, bending his wings a little to the side to catch the breeze right. Shueh smiled as he watched him swooping over the nearer hills with great speed, until he flared, suddenly slowing and seeming to rise imperceptibly, and come to a soft landing not three paces away. Shueh thought he was a magnificent sight, the rays of the sun glinting off his wings with an array of colors.

"I greet you, *mal'akh* Eliyahu," Shueh said warmly as he bowed his head to the messenger in greeting.

"Caw!" was the bird's inevitable reply, although it was a bit muffled because of the treasure he held in his beak.

"What tidings of the wide world do you bring me this evening?" Shueh asked as put his hands on his knees and leaned forward, cocking his head to one side.

The bird cocked his head in the same direction, but then reached up with one of his taloned feet, and brushed a few times at the object clutched in his beak.

"I can't tell what you have brought me from that distance," Shueh coaxed. "You know you have to bring it closer."

The bird flapped its wings vigorously and croaked a few more times. But it finally hopped forward a pace or two, constantly eyeing him with glittering eyes held close to the ground. After another caw, it poked its head forward and released the object from its beak. Shueh waited a moment, allowing the creature to step back a bit before he put his hand out to inspect the thing.

“Oh, Eliyahu, I hope you have not been a thief on my account,” he tutted as he picked up what turned out to be a small, leather bracelet with a few shiny beads sewn into it. But as he examined it more closely, he could see it had been left out in the elements for quite some time. It was dusty and dry, and a few beads had already fallen from their stitches. He turned his gaze back on the bird and smiled. “No, my friend, as always, you are trustworthy and wise. You shall have your reward.”

He reached behind him for his pouch, fumbled with the covering, and fished out a small round of bread, which he broke in half. Putting the other half back into the pouch, he then held out the piece of bread in his fingertips, hoping to get the bird to take it from him. It responded with a series of caws, croaks, and flutters. It looked him square in the eye and seemed to shake his head at him. Even though Shueh knew he was just imagining the bird could communicate in an intelligent way, he could at least understand the bird was not yet ready for physical contact. He obligingly flicked the bread carefully to where the bird stood. The bird swiftly cocked his head to inspect the treat, and also looked behind him to inspect his surroundings for any other threat that may have intervened in the last half heartbeat. With a caw that Shueh thought sounded jubilant, the bird grabbed the bread in his beak and hopped into the air, his wings beating strongly. But he did not go far. He perched back on an outcrop of rock above Shueh’s head, where he let out a few more raucous croaks before devouring the morsel of bread.

Shueh marveled at the glory of the bird’s plumage. It was as black as night, but the rays of the setting sun glanced off the edges of his feathers in every color he could imagine. *His* feathers. How did Shueh know that this was a male? Unless one saw a matched pair together and could compare their size and behavior, one really didn’t have a clue as to which was cock and

which was hen. He had just imagined it when he had named the creature Eliyahu, in memory of the crows that had purportedly fed Eliyahu the prophet while he was similarly hiding in the desert.

Eliyahu, the bird, finished his morsel of bread and let out a few triumphant caws to mark the occasion. Then, surprisingly, he did not flit off into the evening. Shueh was pleased to see the bird glide back down and light on a stone a few hands closer than previously. He made no demands, but simply cocked his head back and forth a few times, eyeing Shueh unblinkingly. Shueh was sure the bird wanted the other half of the bread that he had seen put back into the pouch, but the bird did not glance in that direction. Only at him. He obviously wanted something, but Shueh had no idea what. Tentatively, he put forth his index finger, turning his hand upward as if to show it being empty. The bird rocked back on its legs a bit, but immediately sat forward again and craned its neck a little toward the proffered finger. Shueh held it still as he possibly could. Suddenly the bird hopped one step closer and pecked quickly at his finger. It was all Shueh could do not to flinch in utter surprise. The bird, seeing no reaction, more slowly reached out its beak and held Shueh's finger in it for a tiny moment. Then it backed off, looked him in the face one more time, and finally flew off into the evening without another sound.

As Shueh watched him wing away, he considered the crows that had fed Eliyahu while he hid from Malak Achav. It was hard enough not eating during daylight hours for days and weeks on end, but to have to rely on what a bunch of croaking birds might bring you? Bits of stolen bread and meat picked off the bones of some dead animal? In his mind, Shueh had always opted to interpret the word *orvim*, which could mean either crow or desert dwelling bedouin, as the latter. The Prophet Eliyahu relied on the kindness of strangers who lived in the desert. That was a miracle enough for him.

And speaking of desert dwellers, plodding up the stony path from below in much less grace and splendour than Eliyahu, came his own *orvie*, Shelyeshu'a, carrying no trinket in his hands, but a basket full of good things for dinner, and a skin of wine.

This was his seventh day of fasting and his sixth day alone on the mountainside. After his baptism, Shueh had begun to have a great yearning to be alone: away from everyone for an extended period of time. “Maybe forty days and forty nights,” he had told Yoni, “Just like Moshe on the mount.” Yoni had suggested the wilderness on the eastern shore of the Salt Sea. But when Shueh had begun to pack up, neither Shelyeshu’a nor Miri would allow him to go without them. Ezra had suggested that the two could go with him as far as *Ein Ma’in*, a settlement built around the hot springs. There they could find lodging, and above the *wadi* Shueh could find solitude, but still be within range to provide support.

Three days after his baptism, after a runner had been sent to a money-changer in Yericho and returned with money from Shueh’s accounts, the trio set off southward. Starting shortly after sunrise, they had arrived at the springs only an hour before sunset. They found lodging with an *Ammonim* and his wives, with whom Shelyeshu’a could freely converse, in a large, semi-permanent tent. After keeping *Shabbat*, Shueh had taken Shelyeshu’a with him up into the foothills above the *wadi* to find a suitable campsite. They had brought enough food and drink to provide for Shueh for five or six days. Shel, as Shueh had taken to calling him to avoid the unnecessary repetition of his own name, had then descended back into the *wadi* with directions to return before the provisions ran out.

Shueh waited quietly for his friend to come up to him, then stood and embraced him. Shel was not a man of many words, and Shueh allowed that to him.

“You have not moved since last we met, *ray*.” Shel observed. “That was five days ago.”

“But I am a good *Yehudi*, my friend,” Shueh countered. “That necessitates at least one trip outside the confines of the camp each day.”

Shel began to look around, but then remembered what he would be looking for, and decided it better to start unpacking his basket instead. While he was taking things out, Shueh stepped over to the small alcove he had chipped out of the rock where he stored his meager goods. An empty basket that had held cured fish and bread, an empty wineskin, and a few small, empty bowls

with cloth covers that had held yogurt and butter. Shel dutifully exchanged each one for its replacement, full of aromatic goodness. Shueh playfully reached into the bowl containing some turnip slices Miri had fried in olive oil. He knew how salty and crispy they would be. But, just as he also knew, Shel grabbed him by the wrist and shook the chip from his fingers.

"It is half an hour until sundown, *rav*," he said sternly.

"And with friends like you," Shueh chuckled as he wiped the fat on his tunic, "I am barely allowed the opportunity to sin."

Shel gave a grunt of acknowledgement, but even Shueh couldn't tell whether he was pleased by the remark or just annoyed. Shel had come a long journey in the several weeks since they had both been baptized. But where he had before been in awe and worship of Shueh's title and calling, he had now come to realize his own part in Shueh's mission, and had taken on the role of bodyguard, all with the demeanor of an overly-protective aunt.

"Will you stay with me to break the fast?" Shueh asked as he stowed the last items in the alcove.

"Who else would build the fire?" Shel asked, a little cryptically. Normally a fire was not lit for the evening meal. A small oil lamp sufficed for atmosphere and to melt the garlic butter for the bread. But Shueh watched as Shel pulled another small bag out of his burden, containing kindling and some goat chips. After he had laid this out on the ground, he reached deep into his sack and pulled three trussed-up, fat pigeons he had been secreting there. "Miri tells me it is Shabbat and that you should have a little meat to keep your own meat on your bones."

"Shabbat already? I completely lose track of time out here," Shueh shook his head as he climbed up the rock that shaded his campsite. Below him the Salt Sea glittered like a million diamonds, reflecting the orb of the sun just before it dipped below the rugged western mountains. The sea stretched to his right where he could barely make out the green smudge where the Yordan emptied into it. To his left it disappeared into an indistinct haze before he could make out the fabled ruins of Sedom and Amora, destroyed by an angry God. The evening breeze rising up from the sea was warm. Shueh spread his arms as if to embrace the heat of the day, knowing how quickly the

desert could switch to bitter cold. He would be glad of the fire tonight, and even more, the company. It was always better for Shueh if he could talk through the thoughts of the day aloud with someone. It was as if the act of speaking them cemented them more strongly in his mind, allowing tenuous ideas to grow and interlace with each other and form a more understandable lattice.

He watched the sun as it descended rapidly to the base of the hills. The sun moved so slowly through heaven's vault during the day, but at sunset it seemed to fairly race to hide itself behind the hills. One could barely count to sixty from the time the sun's limb touched the earth before it sucked up its last tendrils of living fire and disappeared, leaving behind the fire and smoke of its passing. Because of his experiences over the last few days, Shueh knew that it was not actually the sun disappearing, but the earth's sphere rolling away from it; that the fire and smoke in the sky were actually just remnants of light bending at different angles through haze and vapor; that the sun never altered itself in the slightest. But despite all this, the poetry and magical nature of heaven's display stayed alive in his heart. A beat or two after he had witnessed the last direct light of the sun fade behind the hills, he heard a slight cough from Shel down below. "*Shabbat shalom*," he heard him say, and he knew that when he clambered back down to camp, Shel would be holding out the bowl of fried turnips for him to sample.

When it was full dark, they sat close to the fire, picking the scant meat from the bones of the pigeons and dipping them in sauce Shel had provided. "This dip does wonders to cover the wildness of the meat," Shueh sniffed, "but the heat! My goodness. I've not cried like this in ages."

"You are not used to the peppers of my people," Shel chided. "You should dip less until you are grown up to the full stature of the men of Amman." To show his own resistance to the spice, Shel dipped his right thumb deep into the bowl, then popped his entire thumb in his mouth and licked it clean.

Shueh shook his head in amazement. "Not even a tear or a single sniff. I don't know that I will ever be so brave." Shueh reached for the wineskin to drench the heat in his mouth.

But Shel put a hand out to stop him. "Here," he said, fishing behind himself for the sack that held the fried turnips. "The salt

and fat in these slices will relieve the burn better than water or wine.”

Shueh eagerly pushed an entire slice into his mouth and crunched it slowly, rolling his burning tongue through the resulting mash. It did seem to take the edge off. Then he reached out to the bowl, took another slice, and touched the edge of it to the bowl of spicy dip. He deftly bit off the side of the slice with the dip and thoughtfully chewed, nodding slowly. “Yes,” he said finally, “just a hint of spice against the tang of salt and richness of the fat.” Swallowing and licking his lips, he nodded and said “One day I might grow up to be as strong as the mighty Shel.”

“But I would be as wise as the *rav*,” Shel sat and breathed deeply, with maybe just a hint of a sniff from the spice. “What have you learned in these three days? Anything this child of the desert might ask?”

Shel’s tone and the number of his complete sentences showed that he was indeed eager to learn. Shueh thought for a moment how he could best transmit to Shel’s mind the thoughts that had been chasing around in his brain for the past few days. He looked up, noting that the clouds had broken up and left patches of stars visible throughout the night sky. Looking to the east, the tops of the mountains were silhouetted against the spray of stars. He pointed to the ridges with the thighbone he was still picking meat from and asked “How old do you think those mountains are? How long have they stood there?”

Shel turned to look and thought for a few moments, sucking his teeth with pursed lips. “Your sages and wise men say it has been almost four thousand years since Adam and his wife were expelled from *Adn*.”

“Is that what you think,” Shueh asked.

“To me it seems much longer than four thousand years. I do not yet have thirty years, but I can imagine one hundred years, when my grandfather’s father was a boy. I can see that. But do you think those mountains would look different to my grandfather’s father than to me? A goat path might have changed, but the stones? No. Not in four generations. How much could they change in forty generations?”

Shel leaned back on his left hand. “And yet, we know they have changed. Rocks that used to be at the tops of the ridges

have fallen down into the valleys. This means the mountains used to be taller. Does that mean the valleys were deeper then, and have filled in with the falling rocks? Or does that mean the valleys themselves have been hollowed out by falling rain, carrying away what was beneath the high rocks and causing them to fall? How many generations does it take for rain to carve out these valleys and leave the high mountains behind?"

Shueh nodded slowly behind him in the dark. "I believe you are closer to the truth than those who seek to number everything. Can man number the days of God? Can we measure the times of his creation? I think it is probably longer than forty times forty times forty that these mountains have stood here. And what came before that?"

Shueh reached into the pouch at his waist and pulled out a small, spherical stone. It fit in the circle formed by touching fingertip to thumb. It was almost completely smooth. Shueh lifted it towards Shel, who received it in both his cupped hands, admiring how its polished surface glinted in the firelight.

"This is something I have been working on to keep my hands busy during the day," Shueh said. "When my hands are busy on something mundane, I can better keep my thoughts going in a line. At first it took concentration to chip off all the corners off a lump of stone, but after I got the general shape, it was just constant turning of the thing, feeling for the slightest bump or ridge, and filing it down with the chisel. It is not yet complete, but I like it all the same. It is my model of our world."

Shel looked confused. "Hold up the stone between thumb and forefinger," he directed. "Turn your thumb until it is fully in the firelight. Now, do you see any shadow of your thumb on the stone?"

Shel leaned over so he could regard the stone from the perspective of the fire. He frowned and shook his head, but was still unsure of what he was looking at.

"Imagine you are your thumb. When you look up from the stone, where is the fire?"

"Over there," Shel said, unsure of himself.

"No, look at it another way," Shueh coaxed. "If you were standing on the stone where your thumb is, which way would you have to look to see the fire?"

Shueh could see Shel's eyes readjust, putting himself into his thumb, and then slowly raising his chin to look up at the night sky. A slight glint of understanding shone in his eye as he said "I would have to look up. Straight up. Like at noon."

"Exactly, my friend," Shueh confirmed. "You're getting this. Now slowly rotate the stone so your thumb is half in light and half in shadow."

Shel caught on quickly, turning his face to the right to gaze into the fire. "Just like sunset," he murmured. "Not up, but to the side."

"Now watch the light on your thumb as you rotate it into the darkness," Shueh continued. "Can you imagine what your thumb is seeing?"

"My thumb is seeing the fire disappear," Shel whispered. But before Shueh could give more instruction, Shel had cocked his elbow to allow him to continue rotating the stone until his thumb was underneath it, and swinging back into the light of the fire. "This is our world?" he asked with wonder shining in his eyes. "I have never seen it this way."

"None of us does," Shueh consoled him. "We see our world stretching away before our eyes and watch the sun, moon, and stars turn in a great wheel above us. We see our world in relation to us, not us in relationship to the cosmos around us."

"How did you come to this knowledge, out here in the desert under star and mountain?" Shel fairly gasped in amazement.

"These stars and mountains are like the *kodesh ha'kodashi* to me, Shel, the innermost room of the temple. Between the outstretched wings of heaven Adonai reveals his word to me. But concerning the shape of the world, I did not learn that here, my friend," Shueh chuckled. "I learned that years ago from one of the *Goy* architects at Zippori. Over two hundred years ago one of their wise men knew that on a certain day, in a town in the south of Mitzrayim, the noon day sun cast no shadow at all in the bottom of a certain well. So on that same day, in the city of Aleksandriya, the man put a staff in the ground pointed straight up. But at noon, the stick in Aleksandriya cast a bit of a shadow to the north. The man was smart enough to conclude from that observation the same thing you just did with your thumb's shadow and the fire, that the world is a sphere. He even

measured the angle of the staff's shadow and estimated from it and the properties of circles, well known to architects, exactly how big around the world is."

"How big is it?" Shel wondered aloud.

"His measurement was two hundred and fifty thousand *stadia*," Shueh explained. "One *stade* is about two hundred and fifty paces. Yes, I know, two hundred and fifty thousand times two hundred and fifty is a very large number. I can tell you the number, but the number wouldn't mean much to your mind. It doesn't to me either. But if you figure a man can walk about 25 *stadia* in one hour, then he could cover about 300 *stadia* in the daylight hours. If he could somehow keep up that pace every day, then it would take him over two years to walk around the whole world."

Shel's eyes bulged at the thought of walking that far, but Shueh also saw he was amazed at the calculations that resulted in that number. Shueh pointed behind him into the darkness. "If you could see there," he pointed vaguely up the hillside, "you'd see all the ciphers where I added up the numbers. Something I learned to do when calculating the material used in basic stonework."

"But you're wondering what it is that I've learned, more than just the age of the hills or the size of the world," Shueh mused, his face toward the stars that were beginning to emerge from behind the clouds in larger numbers. He reached for the little stone orb, which Shel promptly placed in his outstretched hand. "These mountains that it would take us some time to ascend are not even bumps on the surface of the world. The great, deep valley of Salt Sea is but the finest of scratches. When you take the time we experience, the days and weeks and years, and stretch them out over the expanse of something as large as our world, time is stretched to unimaginable lengths. And not just time and distance, Shel, but the living things that inhabit this entire world. How many people have you seen? On the biggest market day in Philadelphia or in Yericho, how many people? Throngs of them. How many languages did they speak? Dozens. How many critters did you see? How many more didn't you see? How many crickets lodged in the buildings; how many locusts hopped in the fields, how many ants burrowing underground?

Where I come from there is a great, freshwater sea. It teems with fish. Two dozen different varieties, and thousands upon thousands of them swimming in great banks and streams of living flesh. And what do they eat? Each of them feeds upon creatures we can barely see. Gennesaret is huge to us. It takes a couple of days just to walk all the way around it. But compared to the ocean, it is a few drips in a huge winevat. I have never seen the ocean, but I have heard that it stretches far beyond the widest horizon. Travelers say it surrounds all the land we know of.” Shueh’s voice trailed off from a tempo that had been gradually speeding up and volume ever increasing as he described the breadth of the world. But now the silence closed in, with just a whisper of wind coming up from the sea below. “And that,” he finally whispered, stretching both hands to point toward the heavens. “How far do the heavens reach?”

They both sat staring into the heavens, noting the subtle difference in the hues of the twinkling objects. While most were various shades and intensities of white, others seemed to radiate blue or reddish orange. Some were so small and close they looked like dust strewn across the night sky. Once or twice, out of the corner of his eye, Shel thought he could see a streak of light, as if one of the stars had somehow flitted from its station, only to disappear into darkness.

“How old are you,” Shueh’s voice broke the silence of their vigil like a sudden locust call.

“I have seen twenty six winters,” Shel immediately replied. “Of course, I do not remember the first ones, but I remember my mother telling me when I had seen eleven winters, and I have kept count since then. And you?”

“I have seen three more than you. Not much. But is that how old you *feel*?” Shueh asked. “When you were a child, did you feel you had only been around for a few years, or did you even remember a beginning?”

Shel admitted with a shrug and shake of his head that he did not know.

“I have spoken with old men,” Shueh spoke from some deep memory. “They all try to tell me that they don’t *feel* old, even though their bodies ache and their hair falls out. There are even some old men who remember their dreams after they awaken.

When they tell me of their dreams, their recollection of those visions are strange. The people they knew in their dreams did not look anything like their live counterparts, and yet they knew who they were. They themselves were not old. In real life they had married and their children had sired children, but in their dreams they were young men again. It seems to them that they are in the center of their life in their dreams, you know, about our age now, when we are vigorous and strong, beginning to get wisdom, and not yet beset with the injury and sickness of men in their thirties and forties. What is it inside whatever part of us it is that dreams that makes us oblivious to age, to memory, to reality?" Shueh paused for another moment or two, and then asked "Shel, where are you?"

His friend gave him a sidelong glance as one hand pointed to the ground beneath him while the other hand slowly traced the profile of his body. "Here?" was the best response he could give.

"No, not where is your body," Shueh coaxed. "Where are you *in* your body?"

Shel knit his eyebrows together in deep thought, then closed his eyes as his right hand slowly raised to the soft spot where his ribs divided. "Here," he stuttered. "Somewhere deep inside here."

"Yes, that is right," Shueh assured him. "Most people I have asked this question will point directly to their bowels, right in their middle. No one ever points to their fingers or their toes. I've never asked a teenage boy, but I imagine they might point somewhere different altogether. But no matter the person, when pressed about where they were inside their body, everyone has a locus of some sort."

"And you," Shel asked. "Where do you live?"

"The people who do not point to their bowels are like me." Shueh raised two fingers of his right hand and tapped right between his eyes. "Most of the time, I live and think right behind my eyes somewhere. But the older I get, the more I feel a tug toward my bowels sometimes. When I feel near tears, it's like I run out of my eyes and into my throat and down to my bowels, just like swallowing the tears from inside your eyes. But even with that, I'm never in my hip or my elbow or the top of my head or in my ears. I seem to exist at a specific point in my body. It

makes me wonder whether the thing that dreams, the thing that thinks, if it even looks like me.”

Shel seemed to ponder this for a while, and Shueh could see an acceptance of this idea slowly gaining on him, until his head began, almost imperceptibly, to nod. But then he suddenly stopped, and his head snapped about to look at Shueh. “But what does my soul have to do with the size and age of the world?”

“I think they are more interrelated than we think, Shel. This is what I have been pondering as I have looked at the mountains and the stars, as I have polished the shape of the world in a single stone. I have been pondering the very first words of the *Torah*, where God explains how he created the earth and everything on it, and then how he created man and woman. Are you familiar with it?”

“I do not know the creation myth of the *Yehudi*,” Shel explained. “Our myths speak only of Melkum El, the chief god. Depending on whether you are in Sela or Dimashq, the names of the gods may change, but in the story there is always swirling water and fighting between the gods until one wins.”

“The Greeks have the same myths as well,” Shueh responded. “But the *Torah* seems to skip the fighting between the gods and the swirling waters to go directly to one God reigning over a quiescent sea. God issues commands over a succession of periods set off by morning and evening, although the first period consisted simply of separating light from dark. During the second period, or day, the sky was created containing the clouds and, I suppose, the air we breathe. The third day was a lot busier, for during this time the land was separated from the sea and all the plants came to be. On the fourth day the sun and moon and stars were created, although I’m wondering whether they weren’t already there, and there were so many clouds that they just couldn’t be seen very clearly, because the scripture says first ‘let the lights appear in the sky,’ and how can there be light and darkness without anything to give off light? Day five saw the creation of fish and birds, while day six started with the creation of land animals and ended with the creation of man and woman. Then God, apparently pleased with the whole thing, declared a day of rest, which has become our own *Shabbat*.”

Shueh sighed at having recounted the whole story of creation in just a few sentences. "I would love to have more of the story, being one who builds things from the ground up, but somehow I know that the story is not meant to be exhaustive in the first place, and secondly, that the story is meant to be vague to allow us to infer many things from it."

"Much of holy speak, whether oracles or holy men, is nothing but double-speak," Shel responded. "This troubles me. People say things that can go either way. When one of the ways happens, the oracle says he was right all along."

"You are not wrong in this perception," Shueh allowed. "And I'll admit, it is difficult to distinguish between proper prophecy and soothsaying charlatans. But I think that because God's words are precious and few, they have to cast as wide a net as possible to spread over all of his children throughout time and place. And the adversary, always just a bit off the proper path, has inspired deceivers to copy the right ways. But back to the story, you asked what the size and age of the world have to do with your soul."

"Yes, I did," Shel nodded decisively. "And I hope to hear the answer before I grow as old as the hills."

Shueh smiled at Shel's barb. "I think God is being intentionally vague about the creation of the earth," Shueh explained, "because he is speaking at the same time about our own creation."

"You mean, how I grew inside my mother and was brought into the light?" Shel asked bewildered.

"Maybe, I hadn't thought about it that way," Shueh responded. "But no, I was thinking not of your body, but your soul, your *nefesh*, your *ru'ach*, or as the *Goy* say, your *pneuma*, or *nous*. That thing living inside your bowels that dreams and thinks and calls itself Shel."

"You call me Shel, *rav*. I call myself Shelyeshu'a," Shel corrected him. "But yes, I understand. You mean to say that what makes me may be older than this body the me lives in?"

"Your words may be few and stumbling, Shelyeshu'a, but this is only because you do not converse in your mother tongue," Shueh praised Shel. "Your mind, however, is brilliant. You made that mental leap much faster than I had hoped."

“It seemed natural,” Shel blushed. “You speak of a world bigger and older than we can think, and then say the story of that world is the story of me too. But I do not understand how light and dark and fish and birds have anything to do with me.”

Shue continued: “I think that whatever is that makes me me and you you, let’s just call it the soul for now, has existed independently of the world for far longer than we can imagine. If the first thing God did was bring the world to light, it is as if God reached out and found something not much more tangible than troubled waters, and brought that thing to awareness of the light. But then he gave it air to breathe and water to nourish it. He made it recognize the lights in the heavens and gave it ways for it to nourish itself like plants. Then he allowed the soul to grow, each in its own direction. Some had the character we associate with fish or fowl, while others developed a deep animal tendency like bears or lions. And after that long, very long development, these souls were ready to actually go into physical bodies that God had fashioned from the elements of the earth. Hence our real character, something that seems already to be within us when we take our first breath, begins to find its way in the world of earth, air, water, and fire.”

“My mother always said my brother and I were different from the first day,” Shel agreed. “Even though we have the same father and mother and eat the same food and breathe the same air.” He nodded his head. “This makes sense.” Lifting his eyes to the heavens, raised his eyebrows and said “I come from there?” Then plunging his fingers to the center top of his belly he continued “to here?”

“I think it is much more likely that it was God who initiated my existence” Shueh admitted, “rather than having to whip up souls in response to young men and women sneaking out behind the goat pen.”

Shel let out a sudden laugh, and then covered his mouth in embarrassment, as if it were forbidden to hear a holy man speaking of common fornication. But slowly, he brought his mind back to the thread, and then said “And apparently my soul walked closer to the sun than yours,” attempting his own joke.

“I don’t follow,” Shueh shook his head. “How is that?”

“Because I can stand the heat,” Shel boasted, scraping the last bit of dip with his thumb and popping it into his mouth.

Shueh had a long, silent chuckle as he patted Shel on the shoulder fondly. “Good one, my friend.”

“But how do you get all that from just sitting here?” Shel asked. “You have no scroll to read, no one to talk to. Who is your teacher, your *rav*?”

Shueh thought for a few moments, looking through the basket of food and delightedly finding a bag of figs Miri had tucked in the bottom. He quickly split it in half, revealing the tender fruit within, and popped one half into his mouth, skin and all. After chewing thoughtfully for a moment, he swallowed and explained. “Do you remember that on the day we were baptized what happened to me when I came up out of the water? Did you see the bird that lighted on my shoulder?”

Shel cast his gaze into the coals of the fire, smiling a little as he remembered that day. “It is hazy in my memory, but yes, there was a bird. He was there and then was gone. Very quick. Did the bird say something to you?”

“Not at that time, Shel,” Shueh recalled. “The bird was not just any bird. I’m not sure if it even was a bird. I think it was the *malaka* of God. Although we use the same word for both a heavenly messenger and a man bearing tidings, we imagine the *malaka* of God to have wings so that it can mount up to the heavens. When Avram was instructed and made his covenant with God, after sacrificing a heifer, a she-goat, and a he-goat, he offered up a pair of birds, but he did not kill them. Each sacrifice brought Avram closer to Adonai, but when he came closest, a pair of birds were let fly to the heavens. And what do we find in the *kodesh ha’kodashi*, in the very presence of Adonai? We find the *keruvim* atop the ark, a pair of winged creatures. Obviously the symbolism in God’s word wants us to understand that when we are closest to him, we will feel as if we had wings, and could mount up to be with him. And conversely, who does he choose to represent his messengers to us? When I came up out of the waters after covenanting with God, He sent his special messenger to commune with me for the first time, and we all saw it as a bird; a white dove. That messenger now visits me many times every day. It is His *ru’ach*.”

Shel looked surprised, suddenly looking about as if to see where the white dove was perched.

“No, you will not find him anywhere here,” Shueh said, gesturing to the camp about them. “You will, however, find him here,” he said, gesturing to the top of his belly, “or here,” he said as he tapped himself between the eyes.

“*Venacha alav, ru'ach yehiva*,” he began, but then remembering Shel did not understand the ancient tongue, he translated it to the common tongue. “‘And the spirit of Adonai shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of Adonai.’ These are words of Yeshayahu, an ancient prophet among us. I struggled with these words in the past, because they speak of the qualities of *Mashiach*, yet I felt them already in my own life. How could such words pertain to me, a commoner? But now that Adonai has revealed my identity, he has also made this prophecy unfold in ways I could not even comprehend just one moon ago.”

Shueh rose slowly from his seat by the fire, groaning as he stretched his muscles into a new position. “This world, with its mountains and seas and valleys, and the stars and sun and moon above, are to me like an open scroll that I can finally read. These last three days I have had the first lines of *Torah* opened and explained to me a thousand times more clearly than the best *ravvi* in the synagogue or temple. Now that you have been here and allowed me to put it into words, instead of just thinking, I can now move on to contemplate the next part of the story.”

Shueh then knelt down and grasped Shel by both his shoulders. “Thank you. Thank you for the food, the wine, and the company,” he said with great sincerity. “But most of all, thank you for being my Shelyeshu’a, a man of great wisdom and understanding who has consented to be my friend. Thank you for hearing me, and understanding me, and helping me to learn more.”

“*Rav*,” Shel sputtered. “It is you who are the teacher.”

“He that teaches,” Shueh pronounced solemnly, “and he that receives, when they understand one another, both are edified and rejoice together.”

Sensing the end of the conversation, Shel turned to fish his own bedroll from the pack he had brought up the hill and looked for a place to lay it out. He found Shueh sitting with his back against the wall with a blanket pulled up under his chin, already with half lidded eyes and breathing heavily. "Goodnight, my friend," he murmured quietly.

Shel made sure the blanket also covered Shueh's toes, and then busied himself with his own bedding. When he awoke before dawn the next morning, Shueh seemed not to have moved. Shel quietly rolled up his bedding and placed it in his sack, wrapping it about the empty bowls he would take down the hill. He quietly descended the path in the half-light, keeping an eye on the sky to spy any white doves that might suddenly appear.

6 Iyyar - They hatch the eggs of vipers

Isaiah 59:5

Yoni watched from the roof of Yochaved's tavern as the two men disembarked from the first ferry of the day. The taller man, dressed in a gorgeous cloak with embroidered collar, cuffs, and hemline, stepped off onto the embankment quickly, starting his way up the embankment. The second was a bit shorter and stouter, and although his cloak boasted less embroidery, was of the most startling blue. It was the second man who had to dig into his purse to produce the coins to drop into the ferryman's outstretched hand, and then try to catch up with the taller man's long strides. He overtook him at the top of the switchback. They paused to look around, and upon locating the placard with barley sheaves carved on it, the universal sign for bread and beer, they pushed their way through the line of donkeys waiting to cross the river toward the tavern's entrance. As they disappeared inside, Yoni fluffed up his beard and pulled his fingers through his hair, still matted from sleep. With a deep sigh he heaved himself up from his stool. He knew the men would be asking after him. Even before he had set his foot on the first rung of the ladder, he heard Yochaved's call from below.

"On my way," he bellowed. "But make sure those *rege* pay before they drink."

When he entered the common room, he found the men neither drinking nor even sitting. They were, however, looking annoyed. They recognized him immediately, the taller one giving a sharp beckoning command. Yoni didn't take commands from anyone, and he wondered how he had been recognized so quickly. These men were obviously priests or elders from Yericho, or perhaps Yerushalayim, but he had seen perhaps two dozen of them over the past couple of years. Had he met these men before? Then it came to him suddenly. These were the two priests who had been present on the day Shueh had been baptized. Yoni recalled the venom he had let loose on the men, calling them old snakes, coming to snatch a few eggs. Yoni nodded to himself, he had been in fine form that day.

"So, did Qayyafa finally send you out to fetch me back to Yerushalayim?," he baited them. "I don't see any *shomrim* to

bind me hand and foot. Or are you expecting me to come of my own free will?"

"You..." began the taller of the two, but he was cut off by a sharp tug at his sleeve from the shorter man.

"Shlomo means no disrespect," he said, stepping forward and inclining his head slightly. "We are here simply to ask you a few questions." He then put out his hand in greeting. "I am Yousef ben Shimon *miBeit* Yehouda of Ramathaim-Zophim. This is Shlomo ben Nachman *miBeit* Yehouda of Hevron. Have you broken your fast already?"

Yoni waited for Shlomo to also present his hand for shaking, but saw only a look of disgust and rolling eyes as the man listened to Yousef's obsequious greeting and the prospect of having to take food and drink in such a sorry roadhouse.

Yoni thrust his lower lip and stroked his chin as he contemplated this surprisingly genteel greeting, then curtly nodded and thrust his hand toward a table at the back where he normally took his board. Turning back to Shlomo he said "Our bread may not be as soft as yours, but the eggs are fresh as can be, and Yochaved does not skimp on the butter."

As they settled into their chairs, young Tiki the serving girl approached to ask what they would like. "Three servings of eggs and toast," Yoni said, not consulting his guests. Then, remembering his manners, he turned to them and asked "Do you take your eggs soft-boiled?" Yousef nodded vigorously, but Shlomo deigned to bark "Hard."

"What to drink, sirs?" murmured Tiki.

"The fruit juices are high on taste and low on pulp," Yoni recommended.

"We'll take two of whatever is the freshest," Yousef quickly complied.

But Yoni chucked Tiki under the chin and said "Make mine a beer, dear. Now off with you, and don't overcook my eggs."

When Tiki had gone, Yoni turned back to his guests and waited in awkward silence. Yousef quickly buckled and remarked on the weather, while Yoni followed up wondering how their travel had been from Yerushalayim.

When he could no longer bear the niceties, Shlomo finally got right down to business. "When you had your little meeting

with those people, there was a man with you. You asked him to speak. Where is he now?"

"*Those* people?" Yoni countered. "Do you perhaps mean my admirers? The ones from whom I make my disciples?"

"You can imagine to yourself whatever you want about them," Shlomo growled in return. "But the man who spoke, he was not one of your...admirers."

"Well, I like to think he still admires me, even though he is my cousin," Yoni shrugged in return. "The stone mason from the Galil with his little wife. I'm guessing that's the one you mean?"

"Oh, is that what he does for a living?" Shlomo raised an eyebrow. "Interesting. But yes, he was a Galilean. I didn't notice his wife."

"What, too short, or just beneath your dignity to acknowledge her existence," Yoni muttered, rolling his own eyes in turn.

Yousef interjected himself as the conversation edged again toward hostility. "The reason we ask, Yochanan, is that we sensed that you regarded him as someone of consequence. We have also heard more rumors since." Yousef's voice trailed off, not enumerating the rumors.

Yoni was drawing his breath to answer when Tiki arrived with their drinks along with her sister Tilla who was carrying the platters. Yousef looked very pleased to see his pair of eggs nestled in their little wooden holders, carved to look like chicken feet, along with a tiny copper mallet that had a sharpened edge. He immediately took up the mallet and began tapping all the way around one of the eggs, gently breaking off its cap, and then ripping a buttery sliver off his toasted bread and dipping it into the yolk. A smile wreathed his face. "Those are fresh eggs," he nodded, licking a little butter and yolk from the hair on his lips.

When he looked over at Shlomo, he found that he had already shelled one of his eggs and was chewing it with a bite of bread. However, he wore a dissatisfied look on his face. Yoni called Tiki back and whispered in her ear. She scampered off as Yoni broke one of his eggs over the top of his bread round, folded it in half, and took a large bite. A few moments later, Tiki returned with a bowl of blackberry preserves, which Yoni handed to Shlomo. "Dry toast is best when anointed with yolk,

but since you don't have any, try these preserves. My friend's wife makes these. Tart, but sweet too."

Schlomo spooned some preserves on his bread, took a bite, chewed, pushed up his lower lip, and admitted "Not bad. Not bad at all."

"So I'm assuming that you are looking for my Galilean friend so you can cart him back to Yerushalayim and lock him up or something?" Yoni asked after he had washed down his first egg with a draught of beer.

"Of course, after the turmoil following Herodos' death, it would be unwise *not* to take precautions about any self-proclaimed *Mashiach*," Yousef answered. "You recall Yehuda of Zippori, Shimon of Ever Hllyardan, and that ghastly shepherd fellow. How many people died as a result of their rebellions?"

"They were a few years before my time," Yoni corrected, "So no, I don't recall them. But I do recall Yehuda HaGalil, father of the *Kana'im* rebels. I'm pretty sure you would have liked him to have been more successful."

"His offspring are a perpetual pain in our posteriors," Shlomo grunted, showering the table with crumbs. "None of these imposters claimed anything more than being a warrior or a king. That's not enough to be *Mashiach*."

"But you've heard that my cousin's name is being circulated as a possible candidate for *Mashiach*?" Yoni asked. "You know that he has no military or royal pretensions. He is not a threat to either you or the *Romim*. Why are you worried about him?"

"At this point, we're not worried," Yousef replied. "Maybe cautiously hopeful would be a better description?"

"Speak for yourself," Shlomo cautioned, beginning to tap his second egg against the table loudly. "Anyone that proclaims himself *Mashiach* is just plain wrong."

"But he hasn't," Yoni corrected.

"He hasn't what?" Shlomo asked.

"He hasn't proclaimed himself *Mashiach*," said Yoni.

"But that's what we hear," Shlomo retorted.

"What you hear and what is actually said are two different things," Yoni said as he began to tap at the sides of his second egg, the edge having been taken off his hunger with the previous one. "It's like the game the children play. I think they're calling

it *Romim* General. The first child whispers something into another child's ear, and then they pass it along to several more children. The last child to hear it says what he heard aloud, and then the first child repeats what he started out with. It can be pretty funny."

"We called it Deaf Old *Rav* when I was a child," Yousef smiled. When he then heard Shlomo mutter something unintelligible under his breath he turned to him and needled "Oh, you were never even a child, Schlomo. You were born an old man." But then, turning back to Yoni, he asked, "So what does he say of himself?"

"Not much at all," Yoni laughed. "Me, on the other hand. I'm the one who says he's *Mashiach*."

"And how do you know that," Shlomo demanded, pulling the last bit of shell from his egg.

"Oh, let's just say that a little birdie told me," Yoni replied. "And just how would you go about testing whether he is *Mashiach*?"

"Little bird, indeed," Shlomo scoffed. "It is not intuition that reveals *Mashiach*." He stabbed his egg into the salt dish, bit off its end and chewed while he spoke. "First of all, he has to be the rightful king of Yehouoda, a descendant of Dawid. His genealogy has to be checked."

"Secondly, he has to be a great warrior," Yousef chimed in, "else how will he drive out the *Romim* and set up King Dawid's throne?"

"Does he have to wield a sword and javelin himself," Yoni wondered, "or can he just be a military mastermind?"

"That is yet to be determined," Shlomo assured him. "But thirdly, he must be able to bring back all Yehudi from exile. That demands both military might and political wherewithal."

"Most importantly in my mind, however," Yousef added, "he must keep *Torah*. And not just some of it, or even most of it. He has to keep it all. Which of course means he has to know *Torah* as well."

"You won't find anyone who knows *Torah* more than my cousin," Yoni assured them. "He has the entire thing memorized." As Yoni regarded their raised eyebrows at his last assertion, he asked "But what is the fifth thing?"

“He must restore the temple,” Shlomo said flatly.

“Is there something wrong with the one we have now,” Yoni asked, a little confused.

“The one we have now is, um, how shall I say,” stuttered Yousef as Shlomo began to glare at him. “The manner of worship conducted there may need to be altered somewhat.” Yousef looked at Shlomo a little sheepishly. “According to some,” he added.

“There have been elements of temple worship that have been lost since the time of my namesake,” Shlomo pronounced, peeling away the last bit of egg white and rolling the hardened yolk between his fingers. “He must restore these to us.”

“How did they ever get a *Tzaduk* and a *Perush* to go on an errand together?” Yoni wondered aloud. “Someone must be paying you both well.”

“That is none of your business,” Shlomo retorted. “You lost your standing when you abandoned your service in the temple to come out to this wilderness. You chose it, you should accept it.”

“Oh I have moved on,” Yoni smiled. “Believe me, I have moved on to better things.”

“We’re not interested in you,” Shlomo growled. “What we want to know from you is where can we find your cousin?”

“I’m not exactly sure,” Yoni answered. “He left here last week heading out for the Salt Sea wilderness. He said he needed some time alone to sort things out; to have his own High Holy Days, fasting and prayer and all that.”

“When will he return?” asked Yousef hopefully.

“I’m not sure” Yoni shrugged. “He said something about forty days and forty nights, but you know how definite that term is.”

Yousef and Shlomo grimaced at each other. “That’s at least another moon,” Yousef sighed.

“Think of it as a vacation from the city,” Yoni proffered. “If Yachoved doesn’t have any room here, I’m sure we can put you up in someone’s home. It’ll be fun! Donkeys, camels, and hey, I can hook you up with my friend Uzi. He has the best remedy for being too tightly wound.”

“Are you making light of this?” demanded Shlomo. “Do you think we’d stay here in this squalid camp longer than we

absolutely must?" He brushed the crumbs from his tunic, stood up, and pushed his way toward the door.

"Dear me," Yousef muttered. "Please, when you see your cousin again, can you let us know. Or maybe you can send him to us. We mean absolutely no harm. We just want to know. We just want to protect our people." He then started to rush off after Shlomo, who had already exited.

"Um, boys," Yoni called from the table. "You forgot something." Yoni tapped two fingers loudly on the table top.

Yousef looked confused for a moment, then clapped his hand to his forehead. "I am sorry. So sorry," he muttered. He turned back to the table, fumbling in his purse, and produced three coins that he smacked down on the table. "I hope this will cover our meal," he said as he bobbed his head and then turned to flee out the doorway.

Yoni regarded the coins. That's at least twice of what Yochaved would have charged. He drained the last of his beer, rubbed the excess from his beard, and headed out to watch the priests snipe at each other as they waited for the ferry to arrive. He particularly enjoyed watching Shlomo trying to shoo all the flies that had come in with the last donkey caravan.

Chapter Two

Author's Notes

In reviewing historical records and writings, modern historians have concluded that there were four sects of Judaism in the first century CE. These four groups were the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Zealots, and the Essenes.

We are familiar with the Pharisees, or *Perushim*, from the New Testament. Their name means “those who separate,” and those from whom they separated were their Sadducee brethren. What we may not realize is that they were mostly confined to the countryside where they had premier influence over synagogues. While it is difficult to define their entire worldview, we can at least note here that they were a bit more progressive than their Sadducee brethren. The Greek idea of rationality had at least slipped a toe beneath their heavily traditional Jewish door. Where the scriptures were vague on some topics, they thought they could rationalize a meaning from what other Jewish scholars had said on the topic. They called this the Oral Torah. While they had been influenced by rationalism, they would never admit to it. On the whole they resisted Hellenization and chafed under Roman rule.

We also know the Sadducees, or *Tzadukim*, from the Biblical account. Their name comes from Zadok, the high priest officiating in the temple during the reign of David and Solomon. When it came to scripture, there was no wiggle room. The Torah (five books of Moses) was just about all that existed for them. The other books of the Hebrew bible were suspect enough, not to mention the Oral Torah, which they considered heretical. Their power base was in the Temple at Jerusalem, which they ruled with an iron fist through their inheritance of the office of High Priest. However, they were beholden to the Romans for their continuing appointment to that office, and therefore kept a bit more cordial relationship with their conquerors.

The little we know about the Zealots, or *Kanai* does not come from the New Testament. There is one apostle called Shimon whose surname is given alternatively as Zelotes (Greek)

or Cananaean (Hebrew), but we have no idea whether that meant he was a Zealot or from a locality called Cananaea. Nor do we know anything about him except his name. However, the historian Yosef ben Mattityahu (known to us as Flavius Yosephus, or “Joseefus”) notes that the only distinguishing belief between Zealots and Pharisees was the ardor in which they pursued liberation from the Romans. The Pharisees wished the Romans would go away. The Zealots tried to make it happen.

The final group is one we call the Essenes, but is a name that this group did not call themselves. They referred to themselves as “The Sons of Light.” It was Flavius Josephus who called them *Essenoi*. Unlike the other aforementioned sects, these *Essenoi* did not congregate together, but sought to spread their influence into every town and city in the land. What Flavius Josephus wrote about them mainly describes the behavior and beliefs of those who congregated at their communal headquarters. What writings we have inherited from them agree with this, but also note that their followers living outside the headquarters lived a lifestyle less stringent. In this chapter we are introduced to the *Moreh*, or master of the *havri habrit*, the community who lives an extremely ascetic lifestyle. You will note that he hails not from Qumran, but from Secacah. The reason for this disparity will be explained in the next chapter when we visit the community itself.

7 Iyyar - And God Caused a Deep Sleep Genesis 2:21

“I don’t think Eliyahu likes you very much, Moshe,” Shueh chided, shaking his head. Indeed, the bird was very agitated. He hopped and fluttered between two high points on the rock face at the rear of the camp, letting out almost continuous caws that were twice as long as usual. He looked as if he wanted to dive down and attack, but would always pull himself back and flutter up in the air instead.

Down on the rocky soil, little Moshe seemed no more concerned about the raucous bird than he ever was about anything. His unblinking eyes continued to shine while his tiny little tongue flicked out of his mouth every few heartbeats. He was unmoved.

“Oh do calm down, Eliyahu,” Shueh sighed. He reached back into his storage compartment for a crust of bread he had saved for the bird, put it carefully between his lips, and began climbing up to where the bird was making his racket. Eliyahu did not like this either, and mounted up into the air. He did not fly away, however, but made erratic circles around the camp, continuing to shout his long calls that began to sound like the roaring of some four-footed beast. Shueh reached the ridgeline, straddled it with bobbing hips and shoulders to retain his balance, and took the bread from his lips and held it high in the air for the bird to see. For a moment the cawing ceased as the bird’s circles tightened around the proffered goody. A few moments later Eliyahu lighted on a pile of rocks a pace or two further up the ridge from Shueh.

“You know you want it,” Shueh coaxed.

“Caaaw, caw caw,” was the reply.

“Are you afraid of a little, itty-bitty snake?” Shueh asked?

“Caaaw, caw caaaaw,” shouted Eliyahu.

“Moshe is just here for the warmth, Eli. He would never think of doing anything to you. You are three times his size; much too big to stretch his jaws around,” Shueh tried to reason with the bird in widely modulated pitches, knowing the words carried no meaning, but soft sounds might calm the nervous fowl.

“Caw caw,” the bird said. Then he looked Shueh in the eyes, gave a violent upthrust to his head and looked back down to where the snake was coiled in the rocks. Then, after a tirade of verbal abuse sent down the defile, the bird began to groom his tail feathers as if nothing were amiss. When he was finished, he looked up toward the bread, made one more tentative hop closer to Shueh’s hand, and said “caw” in a much quieter voice.

“Whatever trinket you brought me for trade, you dropped somewhere down there when you saw Moshe,” Shueh complained, holding out an empty palm next to the proffered bread.

The bird cocked his head, seemed to nod once, and then solemnly stretched his wings and soundlessly caught the breeze, swooping off to the left to avoid the camp. Effortlessly and without searching he dove down to a lower escarpment, snagging something from the ground without so much as a flutter. With a couple short calls he mounted back high in the air, and finally came gliding back down to his former perch, the feathers on his tail and wingtips pinioning this way and that to allow him to step down from the sky with relative ease. With a flick of his beak he tossed his burden toward Shueh’s open hand. Likewise, Shueh gently tossed the bread into the air above Eliyahu’s head. The bird barely had to jump to catch it in his beak, putting his wings out not for flight but simply balance. Shueh watched him grab the bread in his talons, pin it to the rock, and prepare to take a peck. But before Eliyahu broke his fast, he let another string of invective echo down into the camp. Then he silently ate his meal.

Shueh then reached out to take what the bird had brought today. It was a dull coin, but not any of the *Romim* denominations he knew. Shueh put it in his mouth and bit gently. It was not gold. Probably not even silver. Holding it up to look at it along its edge, he could just make out the head of Nike, the *Goy* goddess, but there didn’t seem to be any lettering. “Eliyahu, my friend, this is not a fair trade at all. I am in your debt for many loaves.” The bird did not deign to even look up from his meal. “But I am confident once more that you, my friend, are not a dealer in stolen merchandise. This coin left its owner many

years ago. Perhaps you have been holding on to it for some time?"

Poking the coin into the pouch at his waist, he looked down the ridge on which he stood. From here Shueh could see further down into the deep *wadi* where had left Miri in Shel's care among a small community of desert nomads. He could see nothing of the tangle of greenery that blossomed along the stream at the *wadi's* floor. The descending rock faces were darker brown than the light tan of the surrounding hills, but this was due to shadows and a darker type of rock, not to any hint of moisture. High above the edge of the cliffs, rising behind at least one intervening row of peaks, stood the high dome of a mountain where the fortress Makhôr stood. Its shape could not be made out during the day. Shueh knew it only by reputation, and because of a twinkling light he could sometimes make out on that mountain top in the dark of night. But right now, going slowly and looking more like ants than people, two figures were climbing out of the gorge. Shueh smiled, knowing he would not only have someone to roast meat over a fire for him, but also someone to keep him warm during the long night.

He bid Eliyahu farewell as he clambered back down to his camp. Before he reached the ground he heard the bird's shrill curses being hurled down at Moshe as Eliyahu again mounted the skies. He saw him wing his way toward the two figures struggling up the slope, and imagined them getting an earful of news from the bird before he set off for his own rookery.

Meanwhile Shueh sat down to regard Moshe. He had played with snakes in Natrat as a boy, and encountered many of them in the rock piles from which he fashioned his work. He knew this fellow was a harmless garden snake, not a worrisome viper. It was mostly brown, with a yellow stripe along the ridge of his back, and his head was more round than angular. He wasn't much longer than Shueh's forearm. Most likely the snake would not be too upset if one picked it up gently. If it did manage to bite, the effect wasn't any worse than a bee-sting, if any effect at all. What one did have to watch out for was its skunk-like discharge it would excrete and try to rub all over you. For many long moments Shueh and the snake stared at each other, the one

blinking occasionally while the other constantly flicked his tongue from between his jaws.

“You’re probably wondering why I called you Moshe,” Shueh finally murmured at the snake. “It is because you are tame and gentle, much like I imagine the brazen serpent Moshe raised on the staff to heal those who had been bitten by the *saraph'im* in the desert.” Shueh put forth a finger and gently tapped the snake behind its head. The little snake quickly lowered its head and shifted its body on the ground, but then froze again. “But, like Eliyahu, you’re going to have to earn your keep if you want to stay here in camp,” Shueh cautioned. “And I’m not sure how a serpent is going to accomplish that. But I will be patient and see.”

Shueh then remembered he had seen a few beetles sunning themselves on the other side of the rocks behind his camp a few days earlier. He jumped to his feet and headed along the escarpment to his right about a dozen paces to where he could look back up to the north, viewing the rotting piles of rock from the west where the setting sun was turning them into a golden hue. Sure enough, not three paces away, there were several black spots. Shueh came close, finding a small family of beetles. “Come, master beetle,” he said as he nabbed one of them by the hind leg, “It is time to make your way in the world away from *ima* and *abia*.” The insect scabbled hard against his finger, trying to dislodge itself from his grasp, but Shueh covered him with his other hand and picked his way back to his camp. There he knelt down by Moshe, made sure he had a firm grasp on both the beetle’s hind legs, and put his fingers to the ground just a finger or two from the snake’s jaws. His tongue began flicking wildly and his head cocked just a mite to one side as if to better focus his gaze on the struggling victim. When Shueh was sure the snake was aware of the prey, he let the beetle go free. It began to amble up the rocks away from the snake. Just when Shueh was sure the snake was not really interested, Moshe drew himself into a tighter coil and then struck out for the beetle. In an instant all but the struggling legs of the creeping thing had disappeared between Moshe’s jaws. It took one or two gulps before Moshe was again motionless on the rock, darting his tongue out for news.

Shueh, not knowing whether to feel guilty for having helped nature along its course, laid himself down next to the snake, watching its glittering eyes and delicate tiny tongue with wonder. He could hear the final approach of Shel and Miri as they came huffing up the hill, but as glad as he was to greet them, he was more fascinated with the glowing colors of the snake's scales, and how precisely they fit together. "*Al-gchonech telech, veafar toahal*," he quoted Adonai's curse on serpents to himself. "At least something better than dust was on the menu tonight."

As he began to draw his arms beneath him to rise up and greet his guests, he heard Shel utter an outburst he did not understand as he suddenly dropped his burden on the ground. A corresponding higher pitched squeak came from Miri, Shueh turned his head to look at the commotion, and saw Shel raising his staff over his head and advancing headlong toward Shueh. It took only an instant for the confusion to clear. Shel had seen Shueh prone next to a snake. If Shueh waited any longer, poor Moshe would be squashed like a bug under the heel of Shel's staff.

Shueh's arm shot out to protect the snake, causing him to crash back on his chest and face while yelling "No!" Luckily Shel's reflexes were just as fast at stopping as they were at starting. He straddled Shueh's feet with his heaving chest and raised arms still threatening. "No, Shel, please don't hurt him. He is no threat."

Shel pulled the staff to his chest and took a step or two back, but continued to warily eye the serpent as Shueh struggled to flip himself back over and sit up. Miri, however, let out another squeal, but this one was of a different pitch and intensity as the first. She let down her own burden a little less hastily and stepped closer, kneeling down and cooing. "Such a precious little snake," she said as she reached out and took him firmly behind the head in one hand while the other scooped up his twitching tail. "Oh, he's a darling, Shueh," she went on as she held the creature up to her eyes to inspect it. "I hope you will let him stay the night, at least. He's probably half frozen from the nights up here."

Shueh looked at her in wonder as the little snake wriggled in her hands, either trying to get away or to find a warm spot, he

could not tell. Then he glanced back at Shel who still stood ready to dispatch the beast. Shueh's eyebrows raised as he shrugged his shoulders at Shel, who in turn rolled his eyes and turned himself about to retrieve the dropped luggage.

"Yes, he can stay," Shueh replied as he tried to find a way to embrace his wife without disturbing the snake. "His name is Moshe, and he has already broken his fast."

"Moshe?" Miri held the snake out at arms length to see his whole length. "You named a snake Moshe? How is that even appropriate?" she scolded.

"Well, wasn't it Moshe who held up the brazen serpent to heal *bnei Yisrael* after they had been bitten by the *saraph'im*?" Shueh explained. "Would you rather I call him after the serpent in *Adn*?"

She was holding the wriggling serpent up to look into its eyes. "No," she said with pouty lips. "We can call him Moshe." She looked about for a safe place to deposit the creature, then bent over and helped it to find a suitable rock to coil itself about. "My, aren't we a happy family?" she joyously beamed as she then jumped up into Shueh's waiting arms.

After a long embrace, he set her gently to the ground, and she padded over to where she had dropped her burden. "Shel says we can have a fire, so I found all this brushwood in the *wadi* so we can have a proper one. You know how I feel about goat pellets." Shueh smiled as a surprisingly large amount of tangled wood came out of her sack, ending in a knotted burl almost as long as his arm. "This piece will take forever to burn," she said confidently. "That means it will last through most of the night."

Shueh could see that Shel was already gathering the wood into separate stacks for tinder and firewood, so he would leave the building and tending the campfire to him. He and Miri then began emptying Shel's sack of all its provisions, Miri happily explaining what each was and how she had gotten it, trading with the *wadi* nomads to stretch their remaining coin as far as it could go. There was more than enough food and wine for Shueh's nightly vigils, even accounting for the feast that would inevitably be held tonight. In the end, Shueh had to construct an extra barrier of stones around his larder to accommodate all the bowls and sacks that had been brought up.

While Shel quietly set up a spit to roast the shank of mutton, Shueh and Miri picked their way back to where the beetles were still sunning themselves. Miri gasped when she saw the glittering expanse of the sea. She had not seen it from this height before. This evening's sky was mostly clear, with just a few clouds far on the western horizon, each becoming tinged with pink as the sun hastened its journey. The clouds cast long shadows on the rolling uplands of the Yehudi desert and like fingers across the sky. A flock of waterfowl could be seen coasting along the sandy beaches beneath a village on the far shore. High overhead several birds of prey, they were too far away to be distinguished, banked lazily in wide loops.

"I had no idea how beautiful it is up here," Miri murmured as she pressed her cheek into Shueh's chest.

"It is more beautiful now that you are here," Shueh said, bending his mouth down to her ear.

"And less lonely too, I imagine," she said as she shyly looked up through her lashes.

"Well, there is that," Shueh admitted with a look of mock innocence, "but that also means there will be less food for me."

She reached up and playfully swatted his cheek, but ended up pulling his beard down to plant a long kiss on his lips. Then they both turned to watch the sun being swallowed up by the darkening hills. She snuggled into his side while his thumb traced circles on her shoulder.

"Are you eating anything we send up here?" she asked, smoothing his tunic against his spare belly. "Forty days of this and your bird friend will be easily able to carry you away."

Pinching at his sides, Shueh was still able to gather some flesh between his fingers. "I didn't think you'd mind if I got back into my youthful shape."

Miri's lopsided smirk said that, no she actually wouldn't mind. But she decided it was better to change the subject. "Shel tells me you are becoming quite the mountain philosopher."

"Oh, he tells you what we talk about up here?" Shueh asked as he began leading her back to the camp. "I'm glad that he is sharing with you. What do you remember him saying?"

"He told me the whole story of the creation of the earth," she answered as they made their way back to the camp, "what

happened on which day, and how you told him that not only did it take a lot more than just six days, but how you think it is the story of the creation of souls as well.” As they looked about for a place to sit next to the fire, she asked “So if our souls have been around since long before the world came into being, then who is older? You, or me?”

Shel’s and Shueh’s eyes instantly locked, a look of panic being shared between them. This was one of those questions that had to be answered with the utmost care, or a man could find himself sleeping with the goats. “That is a perceptive question, my love,” he said as he fumbled for just the right answer. “Just because one is brought to light in this world first does not necessarily mean he is the older soul.” But Shueh could tell by the way Miri was looking at him through her eyebrows that this was not leading toward the right answer.

Shel came to his rescue with a blunt pronouncement. “Yeshueh is the older.”

Shueh looked at him in wonder mixed with gratitude, but Miri frowned and fixed her gaze upon him pitilessly. “And just how do you know this?” she playfully demanded.

“Yeshueh is oldest,” he pronounced, not shortening his friend’s given name. “He is the first. Do you not remember who he is?”

Both Shueh and Miri looked down, embarrassed at having made light of this truth they each held just below the surface, keeping it there to hold it precious and unsullied. She looked over at him, gently smiling her apology, but he returned her gaze with no hint of anything but warmth.

Shel again interrupted them. “But Miryam, she is old too.” When Miri looked at him with a mixture of pride and indignity, he elaborated. “Ava was oldest woman, but Miryam, Yeshueh’s woman, was not far behind. Maybe Yeshueh’s mother is older too, but not much.”

Both Shueh and Miri beamed with delight at Shel’s wisdom, chuckling quietly. “And the sagacity of Shelyeshu’a has certainly existed every bit as long as Eliyahu and Moshe,” Shueh laughed, but catching himself before any misunderstanding could ensue, he added “The prophets, I mean, not my animal friends.”

Shel bowed his head in reverent acceptance of the compliment. But Miri looked about and noted the growing darkness. "Surely the sun has set by now," she said as she rose, dusted off her skirts, and began to rummage in the larder.

"Yes, it has," Shueh confirmed. "But before any food, I am dying for some drink." Miri quickly snagged the corner of a wineskin and handed it to him. He pulled out the stopper, held back his head, and splashed a few gobbets of fluid onto his tongue. He closed his eyes as he swirled the liquid in his mouth, enjoying the taste, the feel of the liquid on his parched mouth, and the coolness of the draught. Finally he swallowed and took another sip before passing the bag back to Miri. "I don't know who decided that fasting consisted of both food and drink. Obviously they did not live in the desert," he said as he wiped a few drops from his lips and licked his fingers.

"To tell the truth, when I saw you stretched out on the ground, I had not seen the snake," Miri said as she passed the skin to Shel. "I thought you had passed out from lack of water." She paused for a moment, looking frantically about her. "And where has Moshe gotten to?"

"The pestilence has been moved over to this side of the fire," Shel assured her, pointing to where two glistening eyes could be seen protruding out from under a flat stone. Shel moved his face closer to where the snake lay. "And he shall make no more sudden moves now," he intoned at the creature. Moshe only flicked his tongue back at him.

Shel then raised himself to his feet and began looking for his staff and empty bag. "I will leave you two to enjoy your dinner. I will be back in the morning to help you back down, *sayyidati*."

"No, please stay," Shueh half raised himself and caught him by the elbow. "I have so much more to tell, and you are such a good listener."

Shel was looking back at Miri, who was uncomfortably averting her gaze. An uncomfortable silence ensued, broken only by Shel saying "but you..." and motioning toward the man and wife.

"Unfortunately," Shueh broke the silence, "Whoever came up with the rules of fasting also said 'Do not approach a woman.' So there is no need for you to depart. There will be only

talking tonight.” But as he looked down at his wife’s crestfallen face, he added “And much snuggling to keep warm.”

She smiled up at him while Shel replaced his staff and sat back down. After wagging a finger in Moshe’s direction, he pulled his knife from his belt to begin cutting the mutton from the shank on the spit as he asked Miri if she could find the dip, the one with the fresh mint in it.

As the more timid stars had joined their blazing brethren in the vaulted heavens, after the sheep bone had been thoroughly gnawed and picked clean of all meat, after Miri had sponged the dribs of various dipping sauces from Shueh’s tunic and brushed away the breadcrumbs, and after the figs had been cracked and savored, they all cast themselves on their backs, propping up full bellies underneath warm blankets. They lay in silence, hearing only the whispering of the wind on the rocks behind them. She lay on her right side with her chin tucked into his breast, his left arm resting on her upturned hip.

“So, what has my mountain philosopher, the oldest of all souls, been contemplating lately?” Miri asked in a quiet murmur.

“It’s not what I contemplate that matters,” Shueh answered. “It is what is shown to me.”

“But it all goes on in your head,” she countered. “I’m not sure I understand the difference.”

“Most of the time, when my head is thinking through things, whether it be the shape of rock I want to cut, or what a certain passage of *Torah* means, I collect a mass of earlier thoughts and bring them to bear on the current subject. It is hard to describe, but like little candles popping up in different parts of my head, half formed ideas or pictures of memories.” His right hand raised to his head and he fluttered his fingers about, like a cloud of mites flitting around his head. “When a new idea then forms in my head, like maybe cut a bevel along the back edge of the stone, or what Moshe’s snake on a pole looked like, I can tell it didn’t just spring into existence from nowhere. Each of those little flickering candles passed a tiny bit of light to help form the new idea. The idea is born, but it had parents.” He put his hand down and rested it on her right shoulder. “Do you understand?”

“Oh sure,” she chirped. “Same happens to me when I’m trying to mend yet another tear in your tunic and I can’t quite

figure out how to hold the pieces together and get the thread to bite on something. It's like tilting your head a bit and looking at it from another angle, and suddenly you know what to do."

"That is thinking and contemplation and problem solving," he explained. "But what is shown to me happens in an entirely different way."

"How is that?" she asked.

"Well, it is not just a single way," he said. "It comes in different ways. Take, for example, Adan and Ava eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. *Ravvi* go on endlessly about whether it was real fruit or a symbol of something, and whether eating the fruit caused them to become mortal, if they were even immortal in the first place. Then there's the whole discussion about God not being able to create evil, so he had to set this elaborate trap that he knew the Adversary would help spring in order to get Adan and Ava to sin. I have thought about that for ages, but nothing stands out. But then, yesterday while I was watching a couple of rams but heads up on the mountainside, it came to me in an instant, like a lightning flash. Is eating the fruit the only transgression they could have committed?"

"Well, it's the only thing they were commanded not to do," she answered.

"True," he confirmed. "And sin is defined as knowing good and not doing it. But any sin at all would be enough to get them cast out of the presence of Adonai. And was Adan not a man?"

"Yes," she said warily, not knowing what such an obvious question was supposed to mean.

"And what do men do every day of their lives?" he led her on.

"Besides stink and scratch?" she giggled.

"I mean, what is the great sin that almost every man commits almost every day?" he groaned.

"Oh," she put her finger to her pursed lips, "that's easy. Almost every day almost every man in every land throughout the whole land finds some new way to offend his wife."

Shueh touched the tip of his index finger to the tip of her nose. "Exactly. I've been guilty of it myself. Luckily, I've managed never to offend you in the same way twice, so I can

claim that the first time wasn't sin, because I didn't have knowledge of it."

She opened her mouth to protest, but ended up shaking her head. "No, you never have. That's what I love about you."

"You've got to admit," he reasoned, "my parentage has more than a little to do with that, but our first parents? I'm pretty sure they were every bit as mortal as everyone else. Are you telling me that Adan, having forgotten once to wash his wife's figs before giving them to her, would never ever forget again? And for that matter, there is much more to sin against than just one's wife. Could he not have gotten cross the second time the goats spilled the milk pail?"

"God didn't have to set a trap to get mankind to sin," he exclaimed. "All he had to do was sit around for a couple of days, and it would have happened."

Miri's face screwed up in doubt. "So that's what came to you in a flash?" she asked, "that the whole tree thing was unnecessary in the first place?"

"Oh no," Shueh shook his right hand in front of his face. "I'll get to that in a minute. But consider this for now: perhaps God was eventually going to allow them to pick the fruit of that tree, or maybe even hand it to them himself. There's nothing wrong with knowing the difference between good and evil. There's just a right and wrong time for that to happen."

"How can something be wrong today and right tomorrow?" she asked.

"Where did I spend my nights before we were married, Miri," he asked.

"I don't know," she said. "I wasn't there."

"But not with you, right?" he asked.

"No, that would have been..." her voice petered out.

"But the night of our wedding," he needled her.

"Enough," she said emphatically. "I get it."

"So, in the garden, God gives a command to stay away from that tree, and the pair are expected to obey. Obedience, the very first thing we ever learn. But did God say that the tree was *never* to be eaten of? Why would he have put it in the garden. It would have been purposeless."

“I have to admit, that does lend a new perspective to the whole story,” she nodded with raised eyebrows. “But again, please tell me what the flash was that illuminated this whole story?”

“While I was watching those rams fight, one of them lost his footing and fell,” he said. “All of a sudden, I thought I saw an angel falling from heaven and coming down to the garden where he beguiled Ava, who in turn persuaded Adan to eat. When Adonai came walking in the garden the next day, having found the pair hiding, he asked the Adversary what he was doing there. As distinctly as you and I are talking, I heard him say ‘I have been doing what has been done in other worlds. I have been giving the fruit of that tree to Adan and Ava.’”

Miri thought for a moment, then slowly put words together. “I don’t know what you mean by other worlds, so let’s leave that for now. But if the fruit had been given to others previous to that time, it is possible that God might have given it to Adan and Ava on his own, had not the Adversary stepped in and done it prematurely?”

Once again she was rewarded with a bop on her nose. “I wish you would stop doing that,” she murmured. “You could just say something to let me know I’m right.”

“But it’s so much fun,” he laughed as he poked her again. She quickly moved her head so that his finger fell into her mouth, where she gently bit at it. He brought his left hand, which had been resting on her hip, to her waist where he gently pinched and tickled her.

“I am still here,” Shel’s voice was heard from the other side of the fire. “Just so you do not forget.”

“Ah,” Shueh lifted his head to look over the fire. “I thought you had gone to sleep.”

“When there is much to learn?” Shel asked. “Never. But tell me, was all what you said about *Shaitan* new to you?”

“Very good question,” Shueh admitted. “Moshe, would you do me a favor and bop Shel on the nose for me?”

Shel growled disagreeably.

“Yeshayahu did write about an angel falling from heaven, and I’m certain the ram falling from the mountainside connected with that memory in my head. Certainly the story of our first

parents in the garden is in *Torah* that I have memorized. But the words of the Adversary, those are entirely new. I could not have pieced them together from any little candles burning inside my head. That was a flash from above.”

“I hope there were more flashes,” Shel said, “because you have not finished with what Shaitan said.”

“Yes, there was more, after he was cursed...” Shueh began to explain.

“No, with what you already said Shaitan said, what Miri said to leave alone.” Shel interrupted him. “Other worlds?”

“I think I’m going to have to give you my own little candle light on that one,” Shueh replied. “The words I heard him say are not the words I’m saying to you. I heard his words, and I understood them, but they were in another language, just as strange as the speech of the *Romim* is to us. I’m using your people’s word *alma* to describe the concept I understood.”

“The account of Noe and his flood suffer from the same problem,” he continued. “God said he would flood *ha’aretz*. The same word can mean ground, earth, or a whole land. This leads to the confusion that causes some to believe that everything under the sun was drowned. Likewise, it may be since you and I were discussing the sphere of our world, since I am constantly chipping and smoothing my little globe, that I understood *alma* to be the whole world. That would mean there are other worlds out there.” He paused to look up to the skies, raising an open hand to indicate all the points of light. “Imagine each of the *kokhavim* is a world of its own, each with its own Adan and Ava.”

They scanned the stars for many silent minutes. The fire popped once or twice, and in the silence the call of a night bird could be heard far off. A puff of breeze arose from the Salt Sea, bringing its distinctive odor. Shueh took the moment to disentangle himself from his wife, who rolled over on her left side. He rubbed some life back into his tingling left arm and let out a low whistling breath.

“Yes, my friends,” he finally said. “Behold *alma*.”

“It makes you see how astoundingly great Adonai is,” murmured Miri.

“And how little are we,” added Shel.

“But we think ourselves so great,” Shueh said. “We imagine the whole world to consist of just what we experience in our short days. And in that ignorance we imagine an Adan and Ava who look just like us. We have no idea where Eden was. Who can say that our first parents hailed from a distant land such as Cush, Sinim, or Britannia? Have you ever seen one of the Britannic slaves?”

“Yes,” Miri said. “The poor soul. Lank white hair, and his skin burned so easily just in the sunlight. I can’t imagine an Ava with white hair!”

“And the Cushite,” Shel added. “Hair curled so tight, and skin so black you see them not at night. I can imagine such an Ava.”

“And that’s because you are a single man, my friend,” Shueh laughed. “Perhaps it is you that needs to leave here and go in search of a woman. Have you not heard it is not good for man to be alone?”

“Those are regular men,” Shel protested. “I am no longer Shar. Remember? I am yours.”

“And I am a better man for it,” Shueh acknowledged. “But back to *alma*, perhaps these are the ‘other worlds’ I heard the Adversary mention. Maybe each *ha’aretz* had its own Adan and Ava, those not being so much a person’s name, but a title like ‘first man’ or ‘first woman.’ And maybe, as Adonai was making his covenant with them, maybe their first parents were less hasty and were given the fruit of that tree after proving their obedience?”

“So every aspect of the story need not be as literal as we suspect?” Miri asked, stifling a great yawn. “What is important is that we learn that, above all, obedience is required of every man and woman, even if you don’t see why it is necessary.”

“That, and that we need an *ezer* to help us make it through,” Shueh reminded her, giving into the sympathetic yawn with full vigor.

“And that God rested on the seventh day,” Shel reminded them. “We should follow his great example and rest.” He said this without yawning, but soon succumbed to the temptation.

“Listen to us,” Shueh said. “A bunch of children spending the night in the barley field would stay up later than us.”

“Oh hush, *ba’ali*,” Miri shushed him, “and come closer. It is getting colder by the minute.”

“Yes, *gamada* mine,” he whispered. “And good night to you, Shel. Is there more wood for the fire?”

“Yes,” Shel answered as he turned about to pull the last bits of brushwood from the pile. A shower of sparks erupted from the coals as he pushed the wood into the fire, swirling, ascending, and disappearing into the endless stars in heaven’s vault.

“And goodnight to you, Moshe,” Shueh murmured. “If you get too cold, just curl up with Shel. He needs a good companion.”

Shel growled disagreeably.

But when Shueh arose at first light, as he was chewing one last round of bread, he saw Moshe’s black eyes regarding him from atop the crook of Shel’s knee. Grinning to himself, he lightly pinched the snake behind its head and removed him to a safe distance. “Best he finds out later he spent the night with you,” he whispered. They both turned their heads to regard the first beams of sunlight breaking over the eastern peaks.

15 Iyyar - After they came down from the high place into the town

1 Samuel 9:25

“Please, *ima*, I’m very thirsty,” little Ram pleaded, “Please may I have a cup of water?”

“I’m sorry, but you may not,” chided Aviva. “If you do, you will wake up with wet blankets again.”

“I promise to be good,” Ram whined. “Please!”

“Avram ben Yochanan, it is time for sleep,” Aviva countered firmly. “There are no *glamim* prowling about outside.”

“Pfft,” Ram replied. “Only little babies are afraid of *glamim*.”

“They why will you not go to sleep?” Aviva said wearily. “You’ve had a cup of water and a handful of almonds, you’ve almost filled the chamber pot, and I’ve told you three stories.”

“But where is *abia*?” Ram complained.

“You know he’s up on the roof. He is waiting for...” Aviva suddenly realized why Ram wasn’t sleepy. “He has business up there and is not to be bothered. You know that.”

“But I won’t say a word,” Ram piped hopefully. “They won’t even know I’m there. Not a sound. And I promise I’ll go right to sleep after he’s done.”

Aviva, having reached her limit, rubbed her forehead and shook her head. “You’re going to get me in trouble with your *abia*.” But flicking the back of her hand up toward the roof, she said “Go, but quieter than a mouse, you little *golem*.”

Ram jumped up from his covers, poked his face out at his mother and uttered a guttural hiss in imitation of a golem. Then he pecked her on the cheek and scampered out the door to find the ladder up to the roof.

He found his father standing in his normal spot, looking down over the ferry landing and off toward the *Harei Yehuda*, an undulating black line cutting off the many stars that shone that night. He made sure his bare feet found solid footing before placing any weight on them, stealthily dismounting the ladder and making his way to the darker shade of an overhanging palm tree. He didn’t rustle a single frond as he sat down to await the arrival of whomever it was *abia* was expecting. Suddenly he heard his father’s voice.

“You know it’s not your *ima* that I’m cross with, don’t you,” sighed Yoni.

Ram tried not to inhale sharply, hoping his father was speaking to someone else; hoping he had not been discovered despite his best efforts at silence.

“Yes, I can hear you,” Yoni answered his son’s unspoken fears. “If mice were that loud, the cats around here would all be fat and happy.”

“You heard everything?” Ram wailed quietly.

“Yes, you little *golem*,” Yoni chuckled. “Our bedchamber is right below here, you know. But Andreas’ ears are not so finely tuned, so maybe he will not hear your hissing.”

“You’re waiting for Andreas?” Ram was disappointed. “Why not just go over to his house, then? Why up here? Why at night?”

“Andreas is bringing someone with him, someone important, and someone whose visit I’d rather not broadcast from the rooftops,” Yoni answered. “You understand? No tattletales when we’re done here. Right?”

“Yes, *abia*, I promise,” Ram nodded vigorously. “But who is it?”

“You’ll find out soon enough,” Yoni whispered. “Quiet now, the ferry is pushing off from the other side.”

Ram scooped over to the west wall and moved a palm frond out of his way so he could see. The dual torches that marked both ferry landings defined the familiar figure of the ferryman’s son taking the night shift, Andreas’ light blue and white robe, and one other man. He could not really make out the color of the man’s clothing, but he could at least see that it was very plain. His checkered shawl shrouded his entire face in darkness, so Ram could not guess at his age. But when he disembarked from the ferry, his sure step up the switchback marked him as not yet having reached old age. Andreas and the stranger made straight for the back door of the tavern where they could mount the ladder. Ram heard them breathing heavily as they ascended.

Andreas came first. “Greetings, *rav*. It is a pleasant night, is it not?”

“Just the right amount of breeze,” Yoni answered. Then, as he offered his hand to the stranger, he said “Good evening, *chaver*. I hope your travels have been uneventful.”

Andreas then performed the introductions. “*Rav* Yoni, it is my pleasure to acquaint you with *Moreh* Menachem ben Shahaḥ miBiet Binyamin of Giv'on. He is *havri habrit* from Secacah.”

But before Andreas could go on, Menachem reached out with both hands to grab Yoni's hands. “And I'm sure that this is none other than the *rav* Yochanan ben Zekharyah *miBiet* Levi of Yerushalayim, the famous baptizer of Beth-Abara. I have long wanted to meet you. I thank you for inviting me to meet with you, although I'm not certain why it has to be so clandestine.”

“I am pleased to meet you,” Yoni replied, a little abashed. “But please, just call me Yoni.”

“I think I would prefer to call you by the name your blessed father was directed to name you,” Menachem replied earnestly. When Yoni's eyebrows raised in surprise, Menachem continued “Yes, we have heard the story of your miraculous conception and unconventional *bris*. We were pleased when you left that den of thieves in Yerushalayim, but our hopes were dashed when you did not join us in Secacah.”

Yoni looked at Andreas, his mouth working unspoken questions, wondering if Andreas had let his tongue loose. Andreas, however, returned his gaze with upturned palms and shrugged shoulders, protesting his innocence.

“We may be far from Yerushalayim,” Menachem admitted, “But our ears are everywhere. The Sons of Light must needs be in every community.”

“Since I have not joined you,” Yoni replied, betraying just a hint of annoyance. “Does that mean you consider me a Son of Darkness?”

“In Secacah the *havri habrit* belong to the order of the Sons of Tzaduk,” Menachem explained. “There are other Sons of Light who are of the order of the Sons of Aaron. We believe you are of that order, and a bearer of great light.”

“You are correct in the assumption of my order,” affirmed Yoni, still showing annoyance. “Although there is absolutely no way you could know of it, unless Andreas here has let his tongue run wild.”

“Your friend has indeed let his tongue run wild,” Menachem suddenly laughed. “But you need have no fear of his having revealed secrets. He was too preoccupied in asking questions. It is I who had to concern myself with keeping a lid on my answers.”

“Good boy, Andreas,” laughing quietly as he began to lead Menachem to a stool. “Did you get him to reveal the secret name of God?” But when he saw the older man glare at him through his eyebrows, he knew he had gone too far. “Pardon, *chaver*, I mean no disrespect.”

When all three had propped themselves on the short stools, Yoni gave Andreas a swirling gesture with his hand, giving him permission to finally loosen his tongue.

“As you know,” he began, “our little group here has been preaching that it is soon time for the Lord’s Anointed to appear. Yoni has had an inkling of who the man might be since before he came here, but his premonition was not confirmed until he actually came here ten days ago. We had a long talk, just the three of us, up atop Eliyahu’s hill. Yeshueh, that’s the man’s name, although we all call him Shueh, was very reluctant to admit that he could be *Mashiach*. But he related experiences from his life that could not be ignored, even by him. But after Yoni told his own story and mission, even Shueh was convinced.”

“Your mission?” Menachem turned a quizzical look on Yoni.

“Ah, something your ears have not heard,” chuckled Yoni. “Suffice it to say that it had been revealed to me at a very young age that I was to make straight the way of the Lord. I never really understood what that meant. I thought it had something to do with helping people to come to the Lord. But after reasoning with Shueh and seeing the candles light in his eyes, I knew I had gotten it backward. I was to make straight the Lord’s path to his calling.”

Yoni watched as Menachem absorbed this. He was getting ready to defend himself when Menachem started reciting something. ““These are their ways in the world for the enlightenment of the heart of man, and that all the paths of true righteousness may be made straight before him, and that the fear

of the laws of God may be instilled in his heart.’ These are words from our community’s rules, and it is clear from them that it is the ways of man which must be straightened. *Mashiach* is, after all, a man. So I have no qualms of your mission and its fulfillment, if indeed this Yeshueh proves to be *Mashiach*.”

“Are you sure about that?” Yoni asked. “It appears that each of us has something to learn,” he continued, his face readily showing that he was happy to have the upper hand in at least one thing. But before Menachem could interrupt and spoil his moment, he beckoned to Andreas to continue.

“I must admit, I was skeptical at first,” Andreas admitted, “but by the time we came down the hill, I was convinced. However, Shueh himself still had one reservation. He did not share it with us until later, but the gist of it was that on the night he came to us a man was killed. The action was justified, but Shueh was so distraught that a man had been killed on his account that he felt constrained to try to revive the man’s corpse. Strange, I know, but for a moment he thought he should try and that something might actually happen. He was bitterly disappointed at his attempt and its failure. But when we came back down the hill, in circumstances that need not be retold, the dead man suddenly appeared. Both recognized each other from the night before, although the dead man had never actually seen Shueh. It was a moving scene, but one would have to have been there to have felt its full impact.”

“Granted,” Menachem agreed. “But it is miraculous just to know that a man has been raised from the dead. That a man should come down from Eliyahu’s hill, the prophet who last raised a mortal from the dead, and find a man he had raised from the dead speaks volumes. I sense there is more to the story, though. Please continue.”

“Yoni invited him to share some thoughts at his daily preaching session,” Andreas said. “Shueh taught with power and authority. Afterwards he elected, along with his wife, to be baptized.”

At this last sentence, Menachem winced slightly, but noticeably. “Is there something wrong with his being baptized?”

“Oh no,” Menachem shook his head. “Ritual washings are part of what we do as well. As long as it is conducted properly and with authority, we are of one mind.”

Yoni was not satisfied. “There is still a problem, no?”

Menachem shook his head. “No, I’m sorry. It is of no consequence. Please go on.”

Andreas motioned to Yoni. “Our *rav* should relate the story from this point.”

“The next part is not easy to relate, and may be even harder to believe,” Yoni said quietly. “He elected not to be baptized in our *mikvah*, but instead to enter the waters of Yordan itself. There where the Ark of the Covenant had parted the waters, he covenanted with God and was washed.”

When Yoni paused to try to find the words to continue, Menachem prompted helpfully. “I’m assuming the waters did not part again?”

“No, but the heavens did,” Yoni said. “As soon as he came up out of the waters, I saw the heavens open, and the Spirit of God in the form of a dove descended and lighted upon him.” Yoni paused again, watching Menachem’s eyes widen and his lips part in amazement. “And then I heard a voice from heaven that said ‘You are my beloved son.’”

Menachem’s wondrous face was suddenly clouded, and his mouth clamped firmly shut. “Let me understand this properly,” he said slowly. “You are witnessing to me that you heard the actual voice of Adonai, and that voice proclaimed this Yeshueh not just as his offspring, but as his *beloved Son*?” Yoni did not answer him, but let the man come to his own conclusion. “What you’re trying to convince me is that this man, this Galilean Yeshueh, is claiming to be the Son of God?”

“He didn’t claim it,” Yoni said. Then he gestured towards the spangled heavens, “He did.”

Menachem shook his head slowly for some time, alternately furrowing his brows and opening his mouth, then shutting it again. Finally, he was able to form a question. “Why is it that you tell me of this? Why have you brought me here?”

“Nine days ago a pair of priests came here from Yerushalayim asking after him,” Yoni explained. “They claim no malice, that they are just wanting to protect the people, but I fear

they want to nip any hint of unauthorized Messianic claims in the bud," he said as he drew his index finger across his neck. "I also know that you, like me, are eagerly anticipating the coming of *Mashiach*. What I ask is that Andreas be allowed to introduce Yeshueh to your community. Take him, teach him, and test him. Perhaps if he can convince you, since you have eyes and ears throughout all the lands, you could help introduce him to the world."

Menachem nodded in agreement. "This is a very wise course of action. I am very satisfied that you are acting in good faith, and very glad you did not give him up to those thieves in Yerushalayim. Even if they didn't kill him, who knows what mischief they would get up to with such a man. I must tell you that there are things about this man and your reports of him that are unsettling to me; things that I did not expect of *Mashiach*. But I can promise you that we too will act in good faith and give this man the benefit of the doubt." Turning to Andreas, he asked "Where is he now? Can I meet him?"

"He is in the hills above Ein Ma'in," Andreas replied. "He has been there in fasting and prayer since just after his baptism. We do not know when to anticipate his return, as he said he would probably be gone for forty days and forty nights. Will that be six weeks, or just some indeterminate length of days? We don't know."

"But you can contact him?" Menachem asked. "You could get word to him to come to us when he is ready?"

Andreas looked over to Yoni for confirmation. Seeing it given, he replied "Since he is on this side of the Sea, I shall have to travel down the Selan road. I can be there in two days. I will give word to him and his wife and manservant to find their way to you as soon as possible."

Menachem winced once more. But before he could explain himself, Yoni let out an exasperated sigh. "Out with it, man. Your holy *havri habrit* is for men only. You're not happy that Shueh has a wife, not happy at all. You suppose that *Mashiach* has to be celibate like you, unsullied from ever having even touched a woman. You want to know why I have never darkened your door? The fact that I have a wife, that I delight with her in the pleasures of the flesh, that we have become one in heart and

soul, that I follow the exact same path as Father Adam that I am of less worth than you. Do you really think so poorly of Ava's daughters?"

"The sons of light are promised a place at God's side," Menachem intoned. "But no such thing is said of their wives and mothers. They are but a support..."

But before he could complete his sentence, he was interrupted by the swishing of palm fronds and the pitter patter of a small set of feet. Because Menachem was seated on a low stool, the little face met him nose to nose. "My *ima* isn't going to heaven?" a high but defiant voice demanded of him. "Say that again and I'll push you down the ladder."

Andreas made a move to grab little Ram and pull him out of the confrontation, but Yoni intercepted his grasp. "Menachem, I'm afraid not all introductions were made when you arrived. Allow me to present Avram ben Yochanan miBiet Levi of Beth-Abara."

"He's an irreverent lad," Menachem said in a tone that belied offense having been taken. "Are you going to allow him to speak to his elders like that?"

"If he hadn't said it, then I would have," Yoni said blankly.

"And if he hadn't said it, I would have pulled the ladder down from under the *Av*," the voice of Aviva called up from within the house.

Menachem looked about himself, dumbfounded. "I see that I am surrounded," he tried to laugh.

"Oh, nevermind," Yoni dismissed him. "I guess perhaps other opinions may carry a bit of weight out here in the real world, but that doesn't mean you have to accept them in yours." Then turning to Ram, he said "You broke your promise. Off to bed with you at this instant. And no almonds or water or anything. And if you don't, you'll have to worry about a big bad hairy *abia*, much worse than any *golem* you can imagine."

"Yes *abia*," Ram meekly acknowledged. "I am sorry to have interrupted, *Moreh* Menachem."

As Yoni escorted Ram to the ladder, he leaned over and called, "And you, Aviva, mind your own business, will you please."

"I was," was her curt reply.

Menachem stifled a laugh at her impertinence while Yoni tried to hide his own embarrassment. "Perhaps there's something to be said about your order," Yoni said to Menachem behind his hand.

"Feel free to go with Shueh then," Aviva's voice was heard once more.

"I'm sorry, my love," Yoni called back down the ladder. "I was wrong to say this was none of your business. I was trying to correct Menachem while doing the same thing myself."

Yoni waited for a reply, but none came.

"You were right, and I was wrong, and I'm sorry," Yoni pleaded again.

"You got that part right at least," she said. "Now finish up *our* business so we can get to bed. The chickens will not sleep in just because you stayed up late."

Andreas mounted the ladder first. "I will set off for Ein Ma'in first at first light tomorrow. I will bring Miri, Shueh's wife, back here with me and send Shueh in your direction. But I cannot make any promises for when he will arrive."

"Very well," Menachem agreed. "We will keep an eye out for him."

"We have a small room set aside for your rest tonight," Yoni said as he helped Menachem onto the ladder. "You can depart at your own convenience, although I'd still like to keep your identity from prying eyes and probing noses here in Beth-Abara."

"I can actually depart tonight," Menachem said. "I take great joy in walking under the stars of heaven and have little fear of highwaymen. But thank you for your kindness." He started down the ladder, but then stopped. "Yochanan, you and I obviously read from different sides of the scroll, but we read from the same scroll at the very least. I forgive any heated words you may have said because I know they come from bowels full of compassion. You walk the path of light. I hope you will forgive me for my own stubbornness."

"Yes, *chaver*, I have no doubt of your walk in light. May the light of God shine on your way home."

Yoni waited on the roof, watching as Andreas walked with Menachem to the ferry, ring the bell for him, and push a coin

into his hand for his passage. Andreas then scurried back up the road to his own home where a lamp burned on the ledge by the door awaiting his return. The ferry bumped into the near bank, took the traveler aboard, and departed for the other side. Yoni turned his gaze southward where he imagined Shueh might be gazing at the same stars. He took a calming and cleansing breath, closing his eyes to enjoy the peace.

“I’m still waiting,” Aviva’s voice was heard from below. He quickly mounted the ladder and found his own place for the night.

Chapter 3

Author's Notes

Carl Bloch is one of my favorite painters of the Savior's life. I used to sit right next to a print of his *Christus Consolator* where I worshiped. The joy of the man at His left was how I imagined I might feel when I am brought to that great and dreadful day. But Carl messed up big time with his *Peters Fornægtelse*. You may have seen this painting. A balding Peter turns his head away in shame as a woman points an accusing finger at him from across a fire on the pavement. On steps leading up to an obviously Roman edifice, three chickens peck about for food, one of them a cock in the act of crowing. In the background, barely visible in shadow, a mob of soldiers and priests escort Jesus to Pilate. Jesus' face registers disappointment in Peter's direction.

How did Carl get it wrong? In the first place, the scene takes place outside the place where Caiaphas held his night court. While Caiaphas' office of high priest was courtesy of the Roman governor, he would not have been housed in a monumental Roman building. It would have been in a long-standing house belonging to the high priest, much like American presidents reside at the White House. The residence would certainly not have been Roman, nor likely even Hellenic, as the Hasmonean tradition of Jewish self-rule was ardently anti-Greek. Secondly, the residence was likely in what is now known as the Herodian Quarter, where the upper class Jews lived in opulence. The residence also employed servants. The gospel narrated by Peter (Mark) tells us that Peter went into the residence and sat with the servants to warm himself by the fire. He was inside. The servants had a fire going inside. It was a hearth or brazier where people went to warm themselves. It was not a pile of coals in the middle of a pavement right at the base of some stairs where anyone could step in it.

Seldom do we force our minds to imagine scenes or places in any realistic detail. Like the places in our dreamscapes that barely have any detail, we imagine an official building in Roman times and see pillars and marble steps. We hear of a fire, so we

place it in a convenient place, not thinking of all the foot traffic that routinely traverses a public place, and not imaging the proprietors of the building who might shoo away someone building a campfire.

The first scene in this chapter takes place at the official residence of the high priest, one of the very highest officials in the city of Jerusalem. It is not Annas' or Caiaphas' house. No matter how rich they might have been, there would not have been room for the *sanhedrin* (a body of seventy persons) to assemble in his living room. Archaeology suggests buildings like this would have had a forecourt whose walls were those of neighboring buildings; a front door leading into a hall with benches like a waiting room; a set of interior rooms including official reception room, bedrooms, kitchens, and storerooms, all surrounding an interior open-aired court. It is just such a residence I have imagined for the meeting of the high priest with Shlomo and Yousef. I have located the building in the area of the Wohl Archaeological Museum on Karaite Street in the Old City, a fifteen minute walk that rises some 100 meters from the Pool of Siloam.

Several historical characters are introduced in this chapter. The most famous is Yousef ben Qayaffa, or as we call him (using his family name instead of his given for reason of rank), Caiaphas. He held the office of High Priest from 18-36 CE. Although nominally the head of the priesthood, persons holding this office were not selected by any holy or revelatory process, but appointed by the Roman prefect. They were necessarily men who were compliant to the will of Rome and governed at the pleasure of the prefect. Indeed, Qayaffa had been preceded in the office by three men who each served only a year each, having been replaced in their office either because of ineptitude or unwillingness to rubber stamp Roman policies. One of these single-year predecessors had been Qayaffa's brother-in-law, El'azar, who joins in the scene here. Also present is El'azar's father, Hanan, whom we call Annas, in whose home Jesus would eventually be tried. Hanan was thus Qayaffa's father-in-law. These two were a formidable force, Hanan's nine years in office being surpassed only by Qayaffa's, who at this time had held the office for twelve years. Since women were unimportant to the

men who wrote the documents history has preserved for us, we sadly do not even know the name of Hanan's daughter to whom Qayaffa was married.

Also present in the room are Gamaliel, at whose feet Paul of Tarsus is said to have studied. At this time, Gamaliel held the office of *nasi*, or President of the Sanhedrin. He would live until 54 CE, thus making him approximately sixty years old in this story. He was the grandson of one of the most influential Jewish sages of that period: Hillel (of whom a story is noted later in this book). We met Gamaliel before when Shueh was found in the temple "about his father's business." With him at that time was his twenty-something year old son, Shimon. In this chapter Shimon is now in his forties and heir apparent to his father's leadership of the Sanhedrin. We are also unaware of the names of these men's wives. However, I have married Shimon to one Shushannah, whom we shall meet later. I have borrowed her name and financial liberality from the Susanna mentioned in Luke 8:3. The tension between these two figures will not be unlike that between Nicostratus and Zoe of Rome in 286 CE.

16 Iyyar - Gracious words are a honeycomb Proverbs 16:24

Shlomo and Yousef had been sitting on the low bench for a long time. Whatever conversation they had to share had petered out long ago, so they sat in silence. Shlomo would periodically grimace, clap his hand to his knee, and then extend his leg, resulting in a quiet popping sound. Yousef was still young enough not to suffer from such pain, but that didn't mean his posterior wasn't getting sore. He shifted his weight away from Shlomo to lift one cheek. Shlomo instantly cocked a condemning eye at him and wrinkled his nose. But when Yousef merely massaged his lifted behind, Shlomo nodded and half smiled, and returned his gaze to the closed door in front of them.

Two *Romim* had entered shortly after Shlomo and Yousef had arrived for their appointment with the high priest. The scribe on duty, a wisp of a man whose massive headgear seemed about to topple him over, had bobbed and shuffled when he ushered the soldiers in before them, promising that they would be but a moment. That had been many, many moments ago. Yousef stewed about having to cool his heels for these *Goy* overlords when he was on much more important business. It had already been nine days since they had returned from Beth-Abara with their report, but in their short absence the high priest had been summoned to appear before the prefect in Caesarea Maritima. The high priest's entourage had returned the day before yesterday, and they had received their summons for their own appointment the next afternoon. Yousef found himself fretting, because the Galilean they had been sent to fetch might have finished his fast and had probably already escaped back to the Galil by now.

Finally Yousef heard loud voices from behind the door. It creaked inward revealing the shuffling scribe who escorted the *Romim* to the outer doorway. The officers were gabbling to themselves in their hideous tongue so filled with sibilants and fricatives that it sounded to him like snakes in a pit. Shlomo, however, stood and greeted the officers, calling out what appeared to be their names, and taking each of them by the hand in turn. Yousef shook his head very slightly. Right here in front

of him was manifested one of the filthiest corruptions of the *Tzadukim*, Yousef thought: they welcomed the dirty insurgents with open arms. He could bow and smile at them if they demanded it, but all the while be cursing them inside.

The scribe smiled his own fake smile at the impromptu gathering, but impatiently plucked at their shoulders, ushering them out the main doorway, and then returning to hastily close the door to the sanctum behind him. Shlomo and Yousef exchanged puzzled glances, but were relieved when the door quickly reopened, and the scribe impatiently beckoned them to come within.

The room was dark, with only two apertures high overhead, but they were covered with grilles. An array of lamps did their best to light the room, but ended up simply accentuating the shadows. The wood paneling still smelled faintly of cedar, but it was mostly masked by the smell of the lamps and a bit of incense. Carpets covered the floor whose floral motifs could barely be made out amid the shadows. A long row of shelves covered the outer wall, each cubicle housing a single scroll. Yousef, whose hometown synagogue boasted a full set of five *Torah* scrolls, had a hard time imagining the cost of the scrolls displayed here. There must have been fifty or more.

The high priest Qayaffa was arrayed in a crisp white tunic covered by a generous green robe, embroidered in browns and reds. His head was covered with a spotless white bonnet that sported a single reddish stone set amid a starburst of polished silver. He sat in an overly large chair, raised above the floor with his hands placed just so, one draped over his knee, and the other grasping the armrest. Yousef saw that his hands were glowing with ointment and that the nails were trimmed and the cuticles pushed back. Glancing at the toes protruding from tassled sandals, he could see those too had been attended to, but judging by the high priest's girth, he knew that the man didn't do the work himself.

Behind him in a smaller, but no less ornate chair, sat the old Hanan, a former high priest himself, whose son El'azar had followed him to the honor, and whose daughter's husband now filled the position. He may have been out of the chair, but he was still very much in power. His clothing was less ostentatious than

his son-in-law's, but discerning eyes could see it was no less expensive.

As Shlomo and Yusef began to lower themselves to sit cross-legged on the floor, another door at the back of the room burst open, through which passed three more men, whispering and bowing their heads slightly to the high priest. Yusef could see now that the dynasty was complete, as one of the men was none other than El'azar, Hanan's son and former high priest. Another dynasty was also represented by the other two men, no less than the *nasi* Gamaliel ben Shimon, the President of the Sanhedrin, and his son Shimon ben Gamaliel. The leadership position of the Sanhedrin had been in Gamaliel's family for two generations before him, and young Shimon would most definitely inherit the office when Gamaliel passed.

They settled themselves on benches along the inner wall. When all was quiet, the scribe, who was seated behind a low writing desk, began to perform a perfunctory round of introductions, but was quietly dismissed by Qayyafa. "I believe we are all known to one another," he said softly. "Brethren, I see just the two of you. You were supposed to have brought another with you, nay?" A corresponding murmur also erupted from the benches.

"We were unable to compel his coming," Shlomo began to say. But he was quickly cut off.

"Which is why you should have taken temple guards with you," said El'azar through gritted teeth, "like we asked you to do."

"My brother," Qayyafa said softly, turning his head only slightly and placing an extended index finger on the other armrest, "may I?"

Yusef could imagine twelve other ways the high priest might have exerted his authority over his has-been brother-in-law. Yusef imagined a slicing motion of the hand or a sharp bark. But the calm voice and subtle hand motion showed why Qayyafa had been able to retain his place as high priest four times longer than any man before him save his father-in-law. Without asking his question again, he simply turned back to Shlomo and gestured that he might continue.

Shlomo coughed before he continued. "We could not compel him to come because of his absence." Shlomo paused, waiting for the next question, but Qayyafa simply knitted his fingers together and rested his chin on his hands, awaiting the rest of the narrative.

"We met with the *shequl*," Shlomo continued, "who is a cousin of the man in question. He informed us that the man had departed into the Salt Sea wilderness for a period of fasting. He was unable to inform us of the man's location, nor when he expected his return."

Yousef saw Shimon, seated on the bench next to El'azar, raise a finger in question. Qayyafa acknowledged him with a long blink and a slight nod. "Can you tell me the man in question's name?" Shimon asked.

"He is Yeshueh ben Yousef of Natrat," Shlomo replied.

"Ah, yes," Shimon's brow was knitted in deep thought. "Is this man by any chance a stone mason?"

Yousef and Shlomo exchanged hesitant glances, until Shlomo's face suddenly brightened, remembering the information that Yoni had shared with them. "Yes, he is," Shlomo replied. "It is remarkable that you should know that."

To Qayyafa's raised eyebrow, Gamaliel interjected. "I believe we met the man when he was a boy. He was in company with Zekharyah's son. Something of a prodigy even back then, but to my memory, quite impertinent as well."

"So what does the *shequl* say of his cousin?" Qayyafa questioned. "Does he claim to be *Mashiach*?"

"It is Zekharyah's son that makes that claim for him," Shlomo replied. "He has been burning his brains out in the desert for so long, claiming that *Mashiach* is near. Some day or other he has to pin the tail on the donkey. Maybe some of his crazy runs in the veins of his cousin too."

"That makes sense," Hanan said in his raspy voice. "I remember Athronges who caused so much trouble thirty years back. The reason he was such a nuisance was because it wasn't just him. He had four brothers every bit as nasty as him. So perhaps it does run in families?"

"Whether he is crazy alone or with others will certainly prove of interest at some point in time," Qayyafa gently took the

reins back from his father-in-law. “Brother Shlomo, I understand you were there when this man was introduced. What is your opinion of him?”

Yousef desperately wanted to cry out and explain how he had felt when he had heard the man’s words, how he had wanted to stay and hear him speak more. But Shlomo had dragged him away, and he was certain Shlomo would dismiss the man without consideration. He was surprised when Shlomo did not damn the man’s memory.

“He is dangerous, very dangerous,” Shlomo explained, “but not because he preaches rebellion or disobedience. He is a threat because he, a commoner, knows exactly how to reach out to other commoners and bring them close to him. He speaks of his childhood, his marriage, his wife, and his parents. In doing so he extolls the concept of faith and endurance despite trial and hardship. But even with his folksy approach, he seems to have the vocabulary and the charisma to attract people of higher classes. My *Perush* companion was drawn in himself and had to be extricated before he went over to the man’s fold.”

Yousef’s mouth fell open at those last words. But Shlomo continued, leaving him like a fish gasping on the shore.

“This kind of man, if given the opportunity, will attract a large following” Shlomo concluded. “And I have no doubt, even if the man doesn’t call for a rebellion himself, someone will build a movement around him and start causing serious troubles.”

“The question is, how do we prevent another uprising?” responded Qayyafa. “I have just returned from an arduous journey to Caesarea Maritima and an even less pleasant meeting with the Prefect Pilatus. His men have heard of the troubles publicans are having in the Galil. A couple of them were unable to renew their licences last year, and no new volunteers are stepping forward to invest in their place, what with the rising number of tax-evaders and the dwindling prospect of return on investment. The last thing we need is another crazy Galilean going up there and letting those rebels build a cause around him. Pilatus’ eyes will go out of their sockets, and there’s no telling what he’ll do then.”

“It is a long and dangerous road from Yericho to the Natzrat,” Hanan said. “On his way home, he might fall prey to, well, I don’t know, an highwayman that just happens to be there?”

El’azar then suggested “I hear he has his wife with him. Perhaps we could find a way to use her as a soft spot to convince him to desist.”

“Need those who wield the priesthood of God resort to such dire tactics?” the *nasi* asked. “Surely something less than murder or blackmail would be preferable.”

“And just what does the leader of the council propose as a counter offer?” Qayaffa said, only barely able to cover the acid in his voice.

These jackals, Yousef thought, always fighting between themselves for the upper hand of power. It was a good thing the *Romim* kept them both in power, allowing them to vent their grievances against each other. Let the dogs wear themselves out barking at each other, while the imperial wolf tightened its grasp on their throats. Now was his chance to show these self-centered fools that one need not be *Tzadukim* to think clearly. He coughed and raised a finger.

“Ah! So the *Perush* has something to add?” Qayyafa said with humor that almost veiled his contempt.

“*Kohen gadol*,” Yousef intoned reverently, calling Qayaffa by his full title, “I think we are missing an opportunity, the same opportunity you so wisely sent us forth to accomplish in the first place.”

“Go on,” Qayyafa replied, looking a hint more pleased, both at the blatant flattery and the possibility of more subtlety.

“If we were able to entice him to come here,” Yousef submitted, “especially of his own choosing, we would have the upper hand. He would not be wandering around with rebels and cutthroats in the countryside, but surrounded by wise and powerful men. We could probe him to see what he really desires. If we find him harmless, we can let him go. If we find him dangerous, there are more subtle ways to deal with him under our own roof.” He paused and looked around to see if he had the room’s good will. Seeing no hint of discouragement, he drew a deep breath and continued. “And what if, heaven forbid, he is the

real *Mashiach*? What wrath would we incur if we tried to strike him down or ignore him?” The looks about the room were beginning to become hostile, so he retreated just a bit. “But whatever you wise men determine after meeting him, if you have him here, it will be within your direct power to do so.”

Qayyafa reached up with both hands and massaged his temples, and then stroked his beard at the corners of his mouth. “Your counsel is not unwise,” was the best he could bring himself to say.

“I am certain it was already in your mind,” Yousef flattered him again, hoping to drive the idea home.

The high priest looked back at him through his thick eyebrows, sending a warning that he had said enough. Then he raised his head and looked over to the councilors on the bench. “And just how do you propose that we get him to come here of his own free will?”

While El’azar looked blankly and shrugged, Gamaliel nodded to Shimon. A brief look of fright flashed across the youngest councilor’s face. But Gamaliel’s returning look seemed to exude confidence and assurance. And so Shimon drew a long, deep breath, and brought his hand to the corners of his mouth, cupping his elbow in his other hand. After a moment he began to speak, slowly at first. “The offer must appear to be genuine and friendly, and spontaneous, if possible. It would come better from someone he knows, or at least knows of. My father and his mother were acquainted at one point, and as I said earlier, I met him when he was a boy. And if he is indeed accompanied by his wife, it would be helpful to have my own wife with me.” As the plan began clicking in his head, the words came out more speedily. “The two of us could take a room in Yericho, sending a boy to Beth-Abara to spy on Yeshueh’s return there. The instant the boy gets word, he rushes back to us. We then head to Beth-Abara, but take a short detour to make it look as if we have been spending a holiday at the beach near Secacah. If we offer to travel with them and bring them to Yerushalayim, paying their way of course, it might be enough to bring them here?”

Qayyafa chortled in a way that surprised Yousef. High priests were supposed to be these great, dignified beings, he

thought. But he listened joyfully as the high priest agreed with Shimon. "I can think of no better idea. But what of your wife?"

"Besides the fact that she will obey me no matter what," Shimon intoned, "I think it would bring her great joy to get out of the city for a week or two."

"Then make it so," he said confidently. "You should depart no later than *Talata*, the twentieth of this month I believe. Reuben, make out an order to the treasury that authorizes Shimon to be reimbursed for his expenses, with a handsome bonus if he is able to bring this presumptive *Mashiach* back with him."

The scribe pulled a fresh sheet of papyrus from his desk and gleefully began to write out the receipt.

"But in the meantime," Qayyafa said in a much lower voice, "not a word of this meeting is to go out of this room. The full Sanhedrin will be briefed if and when we have him here among us, but nothing more until then."

Yousef quickly bounded to his feet, and then offered a hand to Shlomo who was much slower. But Qayyafa did the same, and Shlomo took his hand instead. "Fine work, my friend," the high priest patted him on the shoulder. "You brought your own receipts with you, did you not?"

Shlomo designated Yousef with his hand. "Yousef handled all the money."

Qayyafa gave him a solemn nod and faint smile. But by then Reuben the scribe had finished his work, and was ready to hustle everyone out of the room. "The *kohen gadol* has lunch with a delegation from Sela." He pushed the procurement authorization into Shimon's hand and then plucked at Shlomo's and Yousef's shoulders, making sure they found their way to the door.

When they found themselves past the outer door and in the courtyard, Yousef patted his belly and said "Yes, it is about time for lunch. What do you fancy?"

"Eat where you like," he said curtly. "I'm going home for a bite and a nap."

"Alrighty then," Yousef muttered to himself, frowning as he watched Shlomo stalk away as quickly as his old bones would allow. He half closed his eyes and absently patted his belly. Perhaps a skewer of lamb and peppers from that *Habasa* fellow's

place down near *brechat haShiloah*. It would be much better than the bland *Shabbat* dinner he must take in the evening.

19 Iyyar - The singers were as one

2 Chronicles 5:13

Andreas did not want to leave this new Eden he had found in the midst of this impossible desert. He had seen barren lands before as he had traversed the Yordan valley from Kfar Nahum all the way down to Beth-Abara. But although the surrounding vicinity might have been barren, he could always see grayish-green hills on either side, and the deep green of the river ravine itself. But having come from Beth-Abara past Har Nevo, he had come to a wilderness almost completely devoid of any life or greenery. Rocky hills had risen steeply up from the salty shores, composed of rotten and crumbling cliffs. Saltgrass only occasionally appeared in the shadow of a large stone. The wind had whipped about his *keffiyeh* and the sun had shone down hotly on the tip of his nose.

But then he had arrived at the great gash in the cliffs that came down out of the eastern mountains. He had followed a bubbling creek from where it flowed into the salty sea up a steep embankment into the narrowing expanse of the *wadi*. Ever the song of the creek played and echoed from the walls, as ever the walls drew closer and the cliffs higher. He had finally reached a place where it seemed the cliffs would completely close out the sky, where the water seemed to flow out of a rock, and overhanging rocks provided a covert from even the noonday sun. There he had met a few young men lounging under the rocks. His initial fright immediately gave way to relief when they inexplicably called out his name. Apparently someone had known of his coming and had sent the boys out as a welcoming committee. In words barely intelligible to him, they ushered him the remaining three or four thousand paces until he arrived at the settlement of their parents at the hot springs.

The settlement was a steep climb up the northern wall of the *wadi*. It centered around a jet of water that cascaded down a rounded stone face that was many, many times the height of a man. There were several structures built from dry stones and roofed over with bundles of palm. Goat pens hugged the cliff bases, and spacious tents were set out along the winding road up from the *wadi*. The youths had invited him to remove his sandals and to soak his feet in the masonry pool that had been built to

contain the falling waters. The water was warm, and although it did not smell the best, it soothed his aching and dry feet to the point that he had actually moaned aloud in pleasure. The boys and their gathering kinfolk had taken great amusement in that. As he had been paddling his feet, to his relief, Shel and Miri had appeared in the gathering crowd.

That night he had been fêted by the owner of one of the larger tents where Miri had taken lodging. Though they had not killed the fatted calf, the food was good and plentiful, washed down with plentiful draughts of sweet fig wine. Andreas had made sure to balance Miri's account with the host, who had courteously refused payment many times, but inevitably gave in once Andreas had offered the correct sum. He had then fallen asleep suddenly and deeply on a soft, carpeted cushion and had not awoken until a chorus of crowing cocks had shattered his sleep. He had awakened with bleary eyes, dry mouth, and pounding head. But just setting foot outside in the half-light of this green and fragrant garden was almost enough to make him forget his headache.

Now they stood poised to climb up the remaining way out of the valley up onto the exposed hills of the Salt Sea wilderness. He looked about at the happy settlement under the waving palms, willows, and tamarisks and regretted having to leave it. "You picked quite a vacation spot to bide your time while your husband roughs it in the wilderness," he said to Miri as they hoisted their burdens on their backs.

"He would have it no other way," she winked back at him. "You didn't exactly rough it at table last night, *did you?*" she asked, pronouncing the final words loudly and close to his ear.

He covered his injured ear and rubbed his temple. Then, avoiding provoking her any more, he turned to Shel and asked "How far away is he?"

"The way is steep, but not far distant," Shel replied. "The effort will strain heart and lungs, but clear the head more quickly."

After climbing slowly past many small springs whose rivulets fed tangles of bushes and patches of grass, the path suddenly gave way to the arid and lifeless hills. To the right were the grayish white slopes leading up to a pair of bald peaks. To

the left was an undulating but less daunting ridge capped periodically by short towers of crumbling rock. Shel pointed up to one of the rock piles. "He is just up there," he said. Andreas noticed Shel was not winded, while he labored for breath. But, as Shel had promised, each time Andreas had to stop to regain his breath, the pain in his head was diminished.

When they were close enough, Miri waved an arm and called out a greeting. Andreas' eye was drawn to the movement of a black bird as it suddenly took to the air from below the rock pile. The bird flew down over their heads, cawed a couple times, and circled back up from where he had come. When he floated back to the ground, Andreas saw Shueh's hand raised to give the bird a place to roost. Despite his breathless state, he broke into a trot to cover the last fifty paces. But coming to the camp, he stopped short. Shueh's right arm was held out just above his lap with a full grown raven perched on the back of his fingers. But his left hand was extended at about the same level, cupping a coiled snake. The bird was utterly calm, showing no alarm at the serpent, but simply cocking its head this way and that to look into the faces of the approaching party. The snake regarded the scene impassively, black eyes glinting brightly, but moving only its tiny tongue.

"Behold the keeper of feathers and serpents," announced Miri with mock ostentation. "He carries wisdom in his left hand, and power in his right."

"But he carries little flesh on his bones," Andreas said, gaping at the diminished frame he saw before him.

Neither Shueh nor Miri heard him, however, She rushed to her husband, sending the bird mounting back into the air and quickly finding a roost on the rocks overhead. But after giving Shueh only a peck, she lifted the snake from his hand and cupped him to her breast. "Oh Moshe, Moshe, Moshe," she said in a sing-song, motherly tone. "Has you been keeping yourself warm?"

"Moshe is warm enough," Shueh replied in his stead. "And he and Eliyahu have at least concluded a truce. But their keeper has been getting quite cold at times."

Miri, still clutching the serpent in one hand, fell into Shueh's outstretched arms. Andreas laughed aloud as he saw the two in

each other's embrace with the snake's tiny head popping up through Miri's tresses, blithely flicking his tongue. "With Elilyahu and Moshe already represented, I'm guessing that you now call yourself Noach. How many other beasts will you collect, and where is your *tevet*?"

"There will be no *tevet*, and no more beasts, I'm afraid," answered Shueh. "And by the look on your face, I'm pretty sure these two beasts will be looking for new homes before nightfall."

Andreas was flustered. While he had been thinking about how he would tell Shueh of his errand, he had no idea how Shueh would have read that on his face. "It need not be this very day," he stuttered.

"No worries my friend, I am ready to move on," Shueh consoled him. "I have learned what I can here and am ready for a change of scenery. I'm assuming you have come to bring me news of my next destination? Hopefully it will be less bleak than this."

"Yoni bids you attend the Master at Secacah," Andreas jumped right to the business at hand. "Their learning is deep and their knowledge is ancient."

Shueh invited the party to sit. "We can take our ease for a time yet," he said. "What is it that Yoni thinks I can learn from this Master, and where is Secacah?"

"Secacah is on the other side of the Salt Sea," Andreas explained, "hard by its northern end."

"Ah, I have already glimpsed it then," Shueh nodded. "A walled village?"

"Yes, I believe it was built as a desert redoubt for some prince," Andreas continued, "but was taken over by the Sons of Light as their headquarters some years ago."

"Ah yes, the Sons of Light," Shueh confirmed. "I have known several of them over the years. There was an elderly man named Shmuel in Natzrat. He tried to recruit me a time or two. But it seems my evil lifestyle kept me out in the end," he laughed as he hugged Miri to his side. "So what is it that Yoni thinks I can learn from them?"

"As you may know, they are eagerly anticipating the coming of *Mashiach*," said Andreas, rehearsing Yoni's words as best he could remember them. "Yoni has asked that I be allowed to

introduce you to their community. He asked them to take you and test you. If you can convince them you are indeed *Mashiach*, since they have adherents throughout all the lands, they could help introduce you to the world.”

“That is a bad idea,” Shel pronounced from where he leaned against the rock wall.

“How so, my *orvie*,” asked Shueh. “You know something of this village?”

“A little,” Shel admitted. “But they do not own things of worth for a *ganab*, so we did not often go there.”

“Because they have no riches,” Shueh pried a little further, “you think it unwise to go?”

“Because they have no women,” Shel said bluntly.

“A valid argument,” Shueh admitted. “But Miri would be more than happy to relax back at the Ma’in springs, I’m assuming?”

Before Miri could nod her assent, Andreas said “I paid her account in full last night. After I introduce you at Secacah I will accompany her back to Beth-Abara,” Andreas paused, “with your permission, of course.”

“I am ready to go,” Shueh responded, “and your plans are well thought out. I am ready to go as well. But, if I may ask, why are you so insistent on such haste?”

Andreas was slow to respond. As he began to frame his words, his lower lip quivered and he blinked back a tear. “*Rav, bnei Yisrael* have awaited your coming for generations. I also long for the messianic age to come in. But there are those who seek to hinder you. We have had messengers from the *kohen gadol* visit Beth-Abara looking for you. They are not seeking the messianic age, but to appease the *Romim* with the absence of uprising. You must be proclaimed with enough of a following that the *Tzadukim* and *Perushim* do not first seek to put you down. The Sons of Light, spread as they are throughout the land, can make this happen.”

Shueh arose, moved over to Andreas, and squatted by his side, hugging Andreas’ shoulder to his. “I understand your fear,” he whispered. “It is one of my own, as well.”

A long silence ensued, broken only by midmorning breeze as it puffed quietly over the rock and stones. "I will go," Shueh finally sighed. "How long is the journey, do you think?"

Shel spoke up again. "If we leave now, we will arrive there before sundown. There is a roadhouse near the village where Miri and Andreas can spend the night."

"And where will the noble Shel spend the night?" Shueh asked sarcastically.

"I am Shelyeshu'a," he reminded them. "Where Yeshueh goes, there go I." With that, he moved toward Shueh's cache of supplies.

"You won't find anything there worth packing," Shueh waved him off. "I ate the last of it last night. "But what will become of Moshe?" he asked Miri.

"I doubt that any roadhouse will like him very much," she said in mock dejection. "I guess he will have to stay here with Eliyahu." Gently letting the snake slither off her hand onto the rocks, she coaxed it "Moshe, you stay away from that nasty bird."

Shueh stood, moved to the firepit, and kicked at its surrounding stones to scatter the ashes. "The nice thing about roughing it is that there is very little to tidy up afterwards." He then looked about, breathed deeply and said "Well then, let's be off."

While the others started picking their way down the slope, Shueh raised his hand high over his head. As if awaiting the signal, Eliyahu swooped down from his perch. Shueh caught him on his hand and then bent low to where Moshe was coiled. "You two have been a blessing," he said as he stroked the bird's head. "I will miss you and remember you fondly." Setting the bird down a safe distance from the snake, Shueh began picking his own way down the hill. Eliyahu hopped about a few times and called out in loud caws. Shueh turned to wave. "Until we meet again, my friends."

As the party reached the trail at the base of the ridge, they all looked up to see Eliyahu soaring and dipping silently above them. He attended them until they reached the end of the rising road and turned to the left to begin the descent into the Salt Sea gorge. He let out a single *caw* and was gone.

Andreas noticed a faint smile on Shueh's lips. "I'm guessing those beasts kept you company in your solitude?" he ventured a guess.

"Oh, to be sure, I enjoyed their company," Shueh replied. "But they are not the only ones bearing those names to have visited me over these past days. We stand here in the shadow of Har Nevo where Moshe was last seen, and within walking distance of Tel Mar Eliyahu where he was caught up to heaven. Do you think it is difficult for them to mount down from the heavens to act as messengers from my Father?"

Andreas' eyes shot wide open, and he began to open his mouth to speak, but Shueh reached out his fingertip and touched his lips while shaking his head so slightly. "This is indeed sacred territory, but even with that, we will not speak more of that here."

The going became very steep from this point on. This path was not as well used, resulting in fallen stones in the middle of the path, not to mention the way it switched left and right to follow the contour of the defile. Ahead of them, however, the hazy blue of the Salt Sea filled their view from left to right. A warm breeze blew up out of the valley that wicked away all perspiration instantly. When they came to another sudden switchback, Miri plopped down on a rock and pulled out her water bottle to have a sip of water. Shel and Andreas followed suit, but Shueh just wiped his forehead and looked over the waters of the sea. Andreas, just noticing that Shueh carried no bottle, abruptly stopped drinking and offered his bottle to Shueh.

"Thank you, but no." Shueh held up his palm. "My fast does not end until sunset.

"I'm so sorry," Andreas cowered. "Should we have waited until nightfall to journey? Or perhaps broken it up into more stages? There is no fat left on your bones to protect you from the sun and heat."

"It is part of the process," Shueh assured him. "From my Father I have inherited the ability to survive without food or drink. My mother's legacy, however, is the intense desire for regular portions of both. I have been my mother's son my whole life. It is time to begin to be my Father's son."

Andreas was confused. "So you don't actually need the drink, but you want it?"

"Desperately, my friend. So take your water bottle and get behind me, you little devil," he laughed wryly. "And speaking of devils, tell me what you know about these Sons of Light we are going to meet."

"As you know, there are those who follow the order of the Sons of Light in almost every town and village throughout the land," Andreas said as he started down the trail. "But living in the world, they are encouraged to live a family life, showing forth the good works and beliefs of the community, so as to encourage more prospective followers. But when one's reputation rises to a certain level, the assembly sends out an invitation. If he accepts it, he leaves wife and children behind and travels to Secacah, to stay for the rest of his life."

"What becomes of the wives and children?" Miri asked scornfully. "I mean, besides being left alone, how do they survive?"

"The community lives an ascetic life, but that doesn't mean they are poor by any means," Andreas continued. "When a man is joined to the community, he conveys all his property to a bursar. An endowment is maintained for each man's family, from which funds are distributed on a regular basis. They are not monsters, you know." When Miri bit her lip and looked the other way, Andreas continued. "If you think the *Perushim* are by the book rule keepers, they pale in comparison to the members of the community. They all have to take their meals in common, sitting in certain ranks and not eating or speaking unless their rank qualifies them. And rank is not even granted unless one has been a member for at least a year, if not two. And if someone lies or speaks out in anger, one can be disqualified from the communal meal for six months or a full year." Andreas went on to illustrate more of the group's odd behavior for some time. Finally, he concluded, saving the most surprising for last. "Oh, and here's an interesting tidbit: their communal latrine is more than a sabbath day's journey from the camp. They are so strict in keeping the law of Moses that they don't even relieve their bowels on the sabbath, it being too far to lawfully walk."

While the others laughed uneasily and raised their eyebrows at each other, Andreas continued. "But unlike the Perushim who strictly keep *Torah* mostly to outdo each other, these men mostly do it out of deep respect for the law. They truly study *Torah* daily with a mind to find out its mysteries and deeper meanings. It is partly on that account that they are in Secacah and not in Yerushalayim."

"I don't follow," Shueh said. "What do you mean? Is not the temple and its precincts the pinnacle of *Torah* study?"

"Well maybe, but not of temple practice," Andreas replied. "According to them, the temple rites once practiced by Tzaduk in Schlomo's temple were lost in the Babylonian captivity, and despite the efforts of the Sons of Light to restore them, the current high priesthood refuses to do anything about it. The community then retreated to this stronghold to build themselves up and to practice the old temple rites. To them, the administration of the *Tzadukim* in Herodos' temple has made it impure and degenerate."

The way was getting steeper and more difficult, so Andreas' narrative was abandoned as they helped each other over rough passages and concentrated on getting down to the shore in one piece. To avoid inconveniencing Shueh, there were no more communal water stops, but each took clandestine swigs from their bottles. But as if as a sign of God's mercy on his toiling and sweating son, high clouds moved in from the west, not enough to threaten rain, but enough to provide welcome shadow from the sun. After more than an hour, when their shadows were cast directly beneath their feet, they arrived at the shore. While the others sat in the meager shadow of a rocky outcrop to eat a hurried meal of bread and hummus, Shueh went on ahead to stand at the end of a little promontory standing over the lake.

"I don't know how he does it," Andreas wondered aloud. "I'm practically dying of thirst, and yet there he is, never complaining, and going on just as strong."

"He has been doing it for over half a moon," Shel said. "I think he has trained his body well in preparation for this day."

"And he's not going on just as strong," Miri added. "I can sense a struggle going on within. With all the talking you were

doing, did you not notice that even when there was conversation going on, he barely joined in?"

"Should we slow our pace to accommodate him more," Andreas wondered aloud.

"We shouldn't do anything but follow," Shel warned. "He will keep his own pace. I will be surprised if we can keep up. The rest of the way is smooth and flat."

Indeed, as Shel had predicted, Shueh did set a quicker pace. He was careful not to go more quickly than Miri's short little legs could handle, but he also pushed them all so that nightfall would not catch them outside. As they walked, Andreas tried to extract more information from Shueh about his time on the mountainside, but seeing as he was focused on maintaining a good pace, it fell to Shel to explain what Shueh had shared with him. Andreas soon became a little frustrated at the terseness of Shel's answers due to his demeanor, the language barrier, and not least being half out of breath the whole time. After Andreas had given up on talking, they all heard a bit of song trailing back over Shueh's shoulder.

Hammer hammer, clink clink
How many masons do you think
Schlomo hired without a blink
To build the temple on the brink.
One for the tower, sharp as an arrow
Two for the ceiling trim, light as a sparrow
Three for the columns, strong and stout
Four for the in door and five for the out.

"What is he singing?" Andreas asked Miri.

"It is one of his work songs his gang would sing to keep in rhythm while chipping away at stonework," she answered. "I've never heard the end of it, so I don't know how many masons there actually were."

Shueh, hearing them discuss his singing, called back to them, "Sing along with me."

"But we do not know the words," Shel complained.

"Just repeat after me," Shueh laughed. "Hammer hammer, clink clink."

The others all parroted back a little reservedly "Hammer hammer, clink clink."

“Sing it like you mean it,” Shueh commanded. “How many masons do you think.”

Miri shouted out with gusto, the other two still a little unsure, “How many masons do you think.”

“Andreas, I’m listening!” Shueh called. “Shlomo hired without a blink.”

All three responded with lusty voices, “Shlomo hired without a blink.”

The call and response went on for a full forty masons, punctuated by laughter and Shel occasionally wondering what a word meant. There followed another song counting the animals that boarded Noah’s *tevet*, which Shueh demanded that they each call out their own verse on the fly. When that petered out, Miri continued in a less vigorous psalm she used to sing while cleaning up after meals, and Andreas countered with a work song he remembered his father and brothers singing on the fishing boat. When Shueh begged a song of Shel, he replied that anything he had sung with his fellow highwaymen would be totally inappropriate. But upon further coaxing, he softly sang a melody of half tones and long melismatic passages in a tongue none of them recognized. “A Parthian lullaby from my mother,” was all he would say after he had trailed off into a long fading high note. The group walked the last paces to where the Yordan trickled into the Salt Sea in pleasant silence.

The crossing was bordered by stretches of soft sand, making it impassable by most any beast of burden, not to mention a few sandaled feet. No wonder the ferry crossing was much further up the river. The men were able to lift their cloaks high enough to step through the waters, only getting the hem of their clothing wet. But Miri rode on Shueh’s back, slapping him the whole way like a beast of burden and collapsing on the other side in tears of laughter. By this time the sun had started to descend into the western mountains casting long shadows over their heads. The final push was less than two hours during which Shueh quietly pumped Andreas for more information on his future hosts. A few lights were beginning to peep from a sky now swept clear of all clouds when they arrived at the roadhouse at the intersection of the main road leading down to Ein Gedi and the track branching off to Secacah. They decided it was too late in the day to seek

entrance at the compound, and Shueh said he wanted something more hearty than the bread and lentils that awaited him with the Sons of Light. He broke his fast by downing an entire pitcher of very diluted wine while his friends egged him on. But after a filling dinner, their host showed them to two small rooms, cleaner than they expected, but no matter. They all fell instantly into dreamless sleep, exhausted from the day's journey.

Chapter 4

Author's Notes

At the northwestern corner of the Dead (Salt) Sea lies one of the most enigmatic ruins of all time: Qumran. Archaeology has confirmed that the structure dates to well before the time of Jesus, but that is about the only thing that archaeologists can agree on. Was it a fort? A villa? A ceramics factory? Or, was it a compound where the Dead Sea Scrolls were written? We don't even know the name of the place from antiquity. The best scholars can do is pick a name from the list of towns scattered along the Dead Sea in the Book of Joshua: Secacah. While each of the other claims as to what kind of settlement this was can hold water, I will hold to the predominant view that this was a religious retreat. There is certainly evidence that is incongruous with supporting a community of scribes, but the proximity and centrality of the compound to the many caves from which the Dead Sea Scrolls were extracted leaves little doubt in my mind. I have chosen to make this settlement the home of those who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls and to use the name Secacah.

One of the Dead Sea Scrolls is called *The Community Rule*, or *Manual of Discipline*. It is very likely the constitution of the Secacahns. It outlines a strict set of beliefs and rituals that the members of this community should follow. Ancient writers such as Josephus and Pliny the Elder wrote about a faith group within the Jewish community that they called *Esseni* or *Essenoi*, which we now call Essenes. It is easy to see continuity between the constitution of Secacah and the beliefs and practices of the adherents of the Essenes, although Josephus was very clear that the Essenes lived in every city of the Jews, and not just in one place. I have chosen to overlook this and follow the prevailing wisdom by populating Secacah with Essenes.

Of the many interesting disciplines, rituals, and beliefs from *The Community Rule*, the one I find the most interesting is a ranking of priesthood authority. Those within the community referred to themselves as being the "Sons of Zadok," while those seeking entry to the community were called the "Sons of Aaron."

This is a topic that has only recently been taken up by scholars of the Dead Sea Scrolls. It is clear that the Sons of Aaron refer to the Levitical priesthood, that which conducted the daily sacrifices and other such duties. However, the superiority of the Sons of Zadok and their duties are not clearly delineated in the Hebrew Bible. Who was Zadok? Most scholars center on the priest Zadok, who was contemporary with King David. But we must not forget that the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews mentions an order of the priesthood named after Melchizedek. The prefix Melchi is an anglicization of the Hebrew *Malak*, or King. Both Zedek and Zadok are written with the same characters in Hebrew, vowel markings not having been added until the sixth century CE. This Melchizedek was the King of Salem, perhaps the same locality that would later be called Jerusalem. I have chosen therefore to ordain those who inhabit Secacah with a higher order of priesthood, or Melchizedek priesthood, than the Sadducees and Pharisees who were of the order of Aaron, or Aaronic priesthood.

19 Iyyar - She openeth her mouth with wisdom

Proverbs 31:26

Shoshannah, or Shannah as she was called by her husband and friends, was not the brightest woman in Yerushalayim, nor even in her family, but at least she was aware of that fact. Her marriage to Shimon ben Gamaliel had been arranged because although the family of the *nasi* had great prestige, their fortunes had dwindled somewhat, and were in need of an infusion of cash. Shannah might not have the answers to all the questions, or even most of them, but she did have money. And it was hers, not her father's. She had inherited it from her last husband, a man she had never much liked, but he had treated her well enough and left her a substantial legacy. It was true that she often used the wrong words in her sentences, or said them in the wrong order. It was also true that her memory was short-lived when it came to places or events. She could get lost trying to get to a friend's house if the regular vendor on a street corner was not there on that day. And if her chambermaid told her upon waking that today was *Arubta*, she might totally forget to make her *Shabbat* preparations by the time the afternoon rolled around.

But none of that really mattered to her anyway. What mattered was what she *did* know. Shannah knew people. She knew their names. She knew what they wore. She knew how much money they had. She knew who liked dogs and who liked cats. She knew who hated their husband but remained faithful, and conversely who was walking in crooked paths, whether she hated him or not. And she knew just from talking with the wives all about their husbands, even though the poor girl might not know it herself. Who cared how much it was customary to pay the woman who did her nails, or how long it took to get to a friend's house or what the way was? People were what was important. And Shannah knew that. She was people smart. Smarter than most.

One thing she knew well about her husband was that he thought she was obedient to him. Just last *Arubta* he had come home from some meeting and told her that he had to travel to Yericho for an 'indefinite period of time,' and that her presence 'was required' on the journey. She wasn't quite sure what some

of the individual words meant, but she knew that it was going to be time away from these dreary, familiar surroundings, and was more than happy to go. She knew that, in order to try to make her happy when she had been forced into something she didn't want to do, he would buy her something special. Nevermind that it was her own money, but at least she could get something nice from him without him begrudging it.

"Oh, must I go, *ravvoni*?" She had miserably replied. "Can't you go on your wretched business by yourself?" When he had insisted, he had actually stomped on the floor to make his orders clear. She had quickly feigned fear and submissiveness, and for the past three days had moped about when in his presence. Not enough to make him angry, but enough to let him know that she would always be obedient to him. He was a good man, and didn't deserve to be miserable by any stretch of the imagination, but she needed to be able to direct his actions when necessary.

When they had started out for Yericho, she was content. The merchants from Sela and Philadelphia made their first stops here, and she could pick up some bargains and get first pick of the clothing and jewelry. She had a cousin there, as well as an old friend who had married and moved there, so she would not be alone. But when she had heard of Shimon's business plans, she had gotten an idea of her own. And since she had invested all that moperly and mock obedience, she had a card to play now to make their travel even more adventuresome.

"So, we're supposed to sit about in Yericho waiting for this mystery man to appear?" She began her campaign as they bumped about in the sedan chair halfway to Yericho.

"Yes," Shimon replied. "I will send a boy to Beth-Abara as soon as we arrive in Yericho. He will await the man's arrival. I told you this before, you know."

"But you know my memory," she complained. "And when the boy comes back? What then?"

"Then we must be quick. You must be ready to leave at that very hour. We will need to first head down the road towards the Salt Sea, and then cut back to Beth-Abara in time to find him there."

"Why can't we just go straight to Beth-Abara?" she asked, beginning to set her trap.

“Shannah, sometimes I wish,” he hesitated. “I wish you weren’t so beautiful,” he continued, obviously thinking he had rescued a possible offense.

“And rich,” she nodded demurely, flashing her long lashes. “But why must we come from the direction of the sea?”

“Because we need him to think we are already on our way up to Yerushalayim and just happened to bump into him as a fellow traveler,” Shimon explained patiently. “The whole purpose of our meeting up with him is to innocently lure him to willingly come with us back home. He will likely be anxious to return to his own home in the Galil, so it might take some doing. And if he smells even a hint of subterfuge, he might bolt.”

“What is ‘subterfuge’?” she asked honestly. “Why do you have to use such big words all the time?”

“It means that we’re trying to do something secretly,” he explained.

“Then why just not say ‘secretly’ instead of ...” she struggled to repeat the word.

“Because secrets are what little girls giggle to each other in the corner of the market,” he answered. “Subterfuge is how big boys practice statecraft. Using the right word in the right place conveys just the right subtlety and connotation.”

“Now you’re using big words just to confuse me,” she said huffily. “But why try to fool him? Why not just be truthful and say where we really came from.”

“Because if we, you and me, heir to the *nasi* and wife of elegance and charm, show up in Beth-Abara as if that were our final destination, absolutely no one will believe a word we say,” Shimon explained once more as he pushed a curtain away to get a quick glance at the road outside.

“I wouldn’t believe me either,” Shannah admitted, “but that’s not what I meant. What I meant was, why can’t we really be coming from the Salt Sea?”

“It would take too much time for us to get from Yericho to the seaside and then all the way back to Beth-Abara,” he tried to draw a map on his hand, showing the relative distances to convince her.

She grabbed his hand and pulled it into her breast. “No, you silly man, I mean, why don’t we just spend a day or two in

Yericho, and then really go to the seaside and enjoy ourselves until this man shows up?"

She was nervous. Would he see through her plans and call her on it? But then she saw his eyes glaze over as always happened when he was in deep thought, with all those big words and state secrets rolling around in his head. She could tell she was in the clear, that he was building his own plan around her suggestion. Since it was his plan, he would be triumphant, and not even remember that she had suggested it.

"Yes," he mumbled quietly. "The boy could watch the road from Secacah and have only a very short run to our lodgings. If we were quick, we could catch up with him *before* he gets to Beth-Abara, and it would require very little subterfuge at all." By now he was practically shouting. "That's it, my beauty queen. You shall have a proper holiday at the beach. How would you like that?"

"I will do whatever you ask, *ravvoni*," she said through a fake pout. They held each other's gaze for a few moments, him with the pride of his idea, and her in the submissive role of a proper wife. Then they both broke down in laughter and touched their cheeks together. The game would continue. It was part of who they were. Despite the pain, they needed each other.

For the next hour or two they traveled in silence. He drew a wooden tablet with a hinged and latched cover from the bag under his seat. While she shelled some pistachios, flicked the hulls out between the curtains, and sucked on the salty nuts, he rubbed out what had previously been written in the wax between the tablet and its cover, and then scratched some of his incomprehensible symbols in the wax. It took him several tries to get his own words just right. She wondered how many of them were big, and if 'subterfuge' was among them.

When he had finished composing his message, he reached his hand out through the curtains and banged on the side of the sedan chair. An attendant quickly parted the curtain. Shimon handed him the tablet and said "To the *kohen gadol*. Directly, but no haste needed."

When the curtain had closed and Shimon had smoothed his clothing, Shannah asked him "Was that our change of plans?"

"Yes," he responded with a sigh. "You'll get your holiday."

“When will we be turning around?” she wondered.

“Why should we turn around?” he replied. “This is the road both to Yericho and the Salt Sea.”

“But I don’t have anything in the baggage I can wear at the beach,” she complained.

Shimon shook his head and pinched his eyes. “You remember I just told you that we’re still going through Yericho.”

“Yes, and what of it?” she said petulantly.

“Were you not already planning on picking up a few nice things there?” he coaxed her to think.

“Yes, but not things for the seaside,” she huffed. “How can you not know that...” But then she stopped and thought. “Yes, that will do quite nicely. Yericho will have more and better attire for the beach. What would I do without my smart man?”

“We will spend two nights, but *only* two nights in Yericho,” he insisted. “You can spend tomorrow in the markets. But then we must be off for Ein Feshkha.”

“But I do not know everything I’ll need. I mean, yes, half a dozen summer tunics and a breezy shawl or two, but what about ointments and soap, or...?”

Before she could recite a tiring laundry list of things, some of which he did not dare to guess their meaning or use, he assured her “There are probably a few things for sale at the resort, but Yericho is only a half-day’s travel from Ein Feshkha, so you can send for whatever you need and have it by the next day.”

It was hard to slow her mind down from thinking about all she might need, but the thought occurred to her that, among the society women of Yericho, who would turn out in large numbers when it was known that the son of the *nasi* and his wife were in town, at least one of them would know about spending a week at the seaside and what all was needed. It would also be simple to find her. Just look for one whose skin was slightly browner than the others, slightly less supple and with a few lines too early for her age. With this worry compartmentalized, she could return to attending to her husband.

Shannah wanted to ask him just who the person was that they were trying to convince to come to Yerushalayim, and why he was wanted, but she knew that a direct query would result in

Shimon throwing up a wall. She would start by playing up his importance. “Why did Qay...” she began to say, but quickly remembered that formalities were important to Shimon. “... the *kohen gadol* feel he had to pick you? Isn’t this something that could have been handled by any other members of the Sanhedrin? I mean, what about Elzavad or Ovadyah? They’re trying to move up the ranks, aren’t they?”

“And were we trying to bring in a merchant or a tavern keeper, either one of them would have been sufficient to have delivered a summons” he explained. “But that is not the type of man we are pursuing. This man is probably highly intelligent, or at least someone who could talk circles around anyone less experienced.”

This is where she wanted him, explaining why he was the only one for the task, so when she asked about the man they were trying to capture, he might let it slip without a thought. But better to stroke his ego just a little more to ensure his distraction.

“So why not send El’azar?” she probed, knowing his hate for the former *kohen gadol* would twist him up just right.

“That ox?” Shimon snorted. “That hot-headed fool? He can’t even keep his *ha’ever* in his *apudda*, much less his tongue in his mouth.”

She giggled and blushed appropriately as her husband, steaming over, allowed himself to slip into coarse language.

“Forgive me,” Shimon shook his head, “but what you suggest is absurd.”

“So who is this man?” she sprung her trap. “Is he a *rav* of some sort, someone with so many brains?”

“Actually no, he’s just a stonemason,” he admitted.

“A stonemason?” she laughed aloud. “Why are brains of any sort needed to deliver summons to some poor as dirt, sweaty day-laborer? Why don’t you just pay some *pirutsa* to reel him in?”

“He may be a stonemason, but he also thinks he is *Mashiach*,” he countered. “He’s not going to fall to the wiles of a prostitute.”

“*Mashiach*!” Shannah exclaimed, and was then silent, not knowing what else to say. Even she knew that such men were horrible threats to society.

"I should not have told you that," he reflected after her protracted silence. "You must forget I told you that, and you must tell no one else."

She nodded her head dumbly as she considered her husband's task. But then she remembered something else. "He is not one of those zealots who abandon their wife and go out in the desert, is he?"

"No, although where we are going is very near their wretched encampment," he almost spat in disgust.

"So, since he has a wife, perhaps I can be of help," her voice lilted as she trailed off in humming.

"And just how would you help?" he retorted.

She had no idea just how she would go about it, but she knew that if she could have a few moments alone with the man's bride, she would wrap that woman around her finger, thus capturing her man as well. But as she considered telling Shimon this, she regretted building up his ego so much. She could not bring him down from such a lofty perch by telling him to leave it to her. This would have to be done behind the scenes, without his knowledge, and letting him assume the credit for the whole affair. Ah, but she would know, wouldn't she?

"Oh you know, I could distract the poor little girl with some baubles while you two men whisper state secrets," she lied. And then, trying to eke out more information before her husband's secretive mind walled up the conversation, she asked "I suppose this upstart, this false *Mashiach* is some sort of zealot himself, even if he keeps a wife?"

"That's the problem," he replied, seeming to draw back within himself. His words came not directed at her, but seemingly from things that he was trying to work out within his own head as he said the words. "He supposedly talks of family life: parents, children, all that sort of nonsense. Simplistic stuff meant to appeal to the *hoi polloi* and their work-a-day problems. And right now, he's not out gathering an audience. Apparently he has retreated into a desert to seek solitude in fasting and prayer. Messianic pretenders in the past didn't meditate, they marshalled other men. Heaven only knows what he, or some other disciple in his ranks, could do with a following of not only militants, but craftsmen, merchants, clerics, and even women."

She could still see the possibilities of a false *Mashiach* leading a rebellion: turmoil, pillage, murder, and even rape. But something in the way her husband grew contemplative while describing the man caught her attention. Her people had been awaiting a *Mashiach* for ages, and in these past years there was something in the general mood of the people that seemed to yearn for his imminent arrival. A whiff of hope wafted briefly across her heart, making it tremble ever so slightly. She would have to give the man a fair hearing before she dismissed him as a dangerous zealot. She was glad she would have the benefit of finding that out from the man's wife. Yes, she could read people, but she doubted whether she would be totally immune to a charlatan's charisma. But the man's wife? She would be able to read through any front she could erect and see directly into what the woman really thought of her husband. She would have to have a few different tools in hand when she met the woman. Baubles may or may not work on a peasant woman with simple tastes and religious fervor. A costly meal could go a long way, but the more she thought about it, the more she figured that a several silver coins, along with the promise of more to come, might be of particular interest to a hard working country woman. Not a bribe, but a gift of support. She'd have to phrase that offer just right.

With all this settled in her mind, she began to think of what a week at the seaside might be like. Fresh water from the spring, breezes coming down from the hills, and nothing to do but relax either in a brine tub or a couch. But come to think of it, what would her husband be doing? She was not so sure this would be enjoyable for him. He was not content to do nothing. She'd have to work extra hard on finding things for him to do. She knew how to do that too.

**20 Iyyar - And the court round about was with
rows of hewed stones 1**

Kings 7:12

Over the purple mountains to the east the spot where the sun would soon rise was beginning to glow intensely. The road house's proprietor was not too happy to be serving a meal before sunrise, nor were the other three members of the party particularly hungry yet. But as the sunrise grew ever nearer,

Shueh swallowed bread and cheese at an alarming rate, washed down by alternating cups of water and fruit juice. He emptied each one in a single draught, which kept the host running for refills. He saw Miri looking at him with thinly veiled disgust mixed with reluctant patience. She knew he had to fortify himself for another day of fasting, but didn't like being in close proximity as he did so. He slowed his pace a bit as the others chewed silently. They didn't need the volume or speed that he required, and he had to admit, after surviving yesterday's parched journey, he might be able to do more than he thought. But still, he not only had to make up yesterday's deficit, but stockpile for whatever lay in store today. He downed two more cups of liquid before the sun sent a searing beam across the table.

"We should be going," Andreas suggested quietly. "Miri and I have a long journey back to Beth-Abara today."

"I've been thinking about that," Shueh said as he dried the whiskers around his lips. "Perhaps you should just make for Yericho tonight. Our funds are beginning to run low. Miri, you could stop at Alpheus' table there for another month's needs. Have them forward it to you at the tavern in Beth-Abara."

"That would considerably shorten our trip today," Andreas agreed. "Nonetheless, we should introduce you to the brethren as soon as possible. I don't know their schedule, but they probably have many things they do each morning."

"What Andreas is so subtly trying to say is 'Make your goodbyes now and make them quick,'" Shueh chuckled. "Isn't that right, Andreas?" When Andreas opened his mouth in protest, Shueh continued. "Come, Miri." He took her by the hand, helped her stand, and they walked out beside the road, turning to look at the beauty of the rising sun. Ahead of them the land sloped gradually down to the seashore. A swarm of warblers were beginning to move about, preparing for another step in their spring migration north. Closer to the road some red-breasted flycatchers were darting about, feasting on the awakening sandflies. A few high, feathery clouds stretched from south to north, ignited to pink and orange fire by the low sun. The beginnings of a breeze was flowing up from the waters were cool and carried an invigorating scent.

"I hope you don't get any ideas about celibacy while you're there," she whispered, looking up at him with sad eyes.

"Believe me," he countered, "I'm counting the days until I finish my fasting. In every way."

"So you're going to go for the full forty days?" she asked.

"If my calculations are correct," he began.

"And they always are," she teased him.

With an eye roll he continued "I should reach forty days right on *Shavuot*. "Wouldn't that be appropriate?"

"Sara and I will make sure to prepare a huge feast for that night," Miri responded. "Your job is to be there on time."

"Sundown on *Shavuot*," Shueh agreed. "I'm already counting the days, but on that day I will be counting the hours."

They embraced. Her face was pressed to his chest where her tears were wicked up by his tunic. A single tear rolled down his own cheek. "Even though I didn't see you often when we were at Ein Ma'in, I always knew you were nearby," he murmured. "It will be so lonely with you being so far away."

"We have done this before," she comforted him. "You've been away on jobs for weeks on end."

"But that was before..." his voice trailed off. "You don't know how lonely life has become knowing who I am. Knowing what I have to do. Before this my friends were, well, just friends. They were the same as me. People I met were just people. Now it is all different. I'm not sure yet how to engage with people, how to treat my friends."

"You treat them just the same as you always have," she pulled her head away from him and looked up at him with a serious face.

"Oh, I do and I will, but it is just different," he tried to explain. "And I'll count on you telling me if I ever forget. But what I wanted to say was not anything about others, but about you. Friends and acquaintant may be different to me, but you, you are the same. You are more, even. Besides Yoni, you are the only person who heard Father's voice. You are the only person who knows me inside and out. There was always a hole in my center when I was away from you before. But now? Now it is as if half my soul were being drained away."

As new tears burst from her eyes, a warm smile also spread over her whole face. "You are the best man in the whole world," she assured him. "And for now, even though I may not be with you, you are all mine."

"Yes," he said emphatically, "And soon you will be all mine, and not just for now, but forever."

She looked up at him again with a puzzled face. "Aren't we already..." she began. But before she could finish, he bent low and kissed her, holding her close for many moments.

When he had finished, he said "Until *Shavuot* then."

She just smiled and started walking back to the road house, her tiny hand remaining in his as long as possible.

Andreas and Shel took their cue and began walking up the road that led up the wadi from the roadhouse. Shueh looked after Miri until she disappeared into the doorway, her eyes riveted on him. Then he turned and trotted up the path to catch up with his friends.

They walked in silence, breathing deeply in the morning air. The path was not difficult. It soon left the wadi floor and climbed up a well-worn path to the right. There it straightened in a steady incline for another thousand paces or so. The compound loomed ahead on the rim of a plateau, but Shueh noticed to his left a wide field covered in an unordered collection of low mounds. Each was oval in shape, only a hand or two high, and covered with flattened stones whose mortar was simply the intervening chalky soil. He raised his eyebrows in question at Andreas, who snorted and looked the other way. "Believe it or not, that's how they bury their dead," he grumbled. "They don't have the decency to collect their bones and entomb them with family, but just stick them whole in the ground. Bone *and* flesh together, how ghastly."

Shel muttered agreement and altered his course to the far right side of the path. "It is not right," he said. "In the open air, and alone. I already do not like this place."

"The world is full of traditions foreign to us," Shueh admitted. "I once met a man from *Partiyah* while cutting out a tomb in Pella. He was horrified that we would allow the body to decay in a closed space. He spoke of a place where the dead are raised on platforms where the birds of heaven clean the bones

before they are interred. But then he also mentioned that further to the east in *Hodu* the dead are burned and their ashes scattered in the river. Personally I'd like to be entombed with my family in Natzrat, but that doesn't make it necessarily 'right' in God's eyes."

"Burying in dirt? Maybe," Shel admitted. "But burning? That is for criminals."

"And what about resurrection," Andreas added. "How can bones that are burned to ashes be put back together?"

Shueh shrugged. "That is one of the mysteries we'll have to find out some day, eh? Perhaps our friends here have an answer."

They had reached the compound and were approaching the gate. A two story building loomed to the left of the gate, which was set in man-high walls that stretched out to left and right. They were a patchwork of walls, obviously added to many times over the years, but they hid all but the two-story building in secrecy and security. In the stone gate was set a firm wooden door. Shueh noted that it was old, but well cared for. A knotted cord hung down from a hole high on the left side. Andreas pulled at the cord. A sound like the bell on a goat's neck rattled from inside. The three men stood waiting for the gate to open. Shueh fingered the joints of the stones in the wall, analyzing the workmanship. Andreas began to grow impatient, and reached for the bell cord once more. Shel stopped him. "Someone is coming, but he walks slowly," he warned.

Finally the others heard the shuffling footsteps. A tiny panel slightly below the men's eyes was then slid open, displaying a rheumy eye behind excessively bushy eyebrows. The eye flitted from visitor to visitor, finally settling on Andreas.

"Are you Andreas of Beth-Abara?" a surprisingly strong voice called out.

"I am Andreas bar Yona of Kfar Nahum," Andreas corrected, "but yes, I come at the bidding of Menachem ben Shahaar."

The eye suddenly disappeared as the panel snapped shut. Now they heard hands fumbling with the latch and soon the door began to swing open, squeaking only slightly on its hinges.

Behind it was revealed a man bowed slightly with age dressed in simple but very clean and well-kept clothing.

“The master said that we were expecting you and a visitor, but he did not mention a third,” the man said sternly.

“I have brought Yeshueh ben Yousef maBeit Yehuda of Natzrat,” Andreas announced formally, “who is accompanied at all times by his manservant, Shelyeshu’a of Philadelphia.”

Shueh and Shel exchanged glances with Shueh mouthing “manservant?”

“We were not expecting a manservant,” the man said slowly, “but as long as he is not unwilling to perform the labor required of all who enter here, he is welcome.” He stepped back and opened the gate fully.

Shueh stepped forward, touching the *mezuzah* and putting his fingers to his lips. Shel followed him, mirroring his actions. Andreas, however, remained outside. “I have pressing business and am already over late in my departure,” he bowed his head. “I pray for your leave.”

“May Elohim bless and guide your footsteps,” the old man intoned. “and keep your precious charge safe.”

Shueh was confused. How did this old man know about Miri? Again he exchanged a confused look with Shel. The old man smiled and answered their unasked question. “We saw the four of you arrive at the roadhouse last evening. We are grateful you separated yourself from your wife willingly. There are those who come here demanding accommodation. You have already proven yourself worthy of consideration.” The old man waved Andreas goodbye and swung the gate shut.

Shueh reached out a hand in greeting, but the old man waved it away. Without words, he motioned for Shueh and Shel to follow him. The courtyard they were in had a single low building built into the wall at their left, and had three other low exit portals. The man led the way to the one on their right. They came out of the passage into a much wider courtyard that opened up toward the hills that backed up the compound. At its far end, set in the angle of the outside walls, were a set of cisterns that sparkled in the morning sun. The old man shuffled toward the water. A slab of stone spanned a deep channel that led in from outside the wall, presumably collecting runoff from the hills and

funneling it into the compound. But at present the channel was dry. The man crossed over on the slab and then stepped down into a *mikveh* to the right of the large cistern. He motioned for Shueh and Shel to follow him down to the second step.

The old man first bent down and vigorously scrubbed his hands in the water. His guests followed his example. Then water was splashed on the head, ears, eyes, lips, and neck. Forearms, ankles and shins completed the ablutions. A communal towel that hung from a wooden rack on the wall was then passed about. After they stepped back over the stone slab, the old man put out his hand in greeting. Shaking Shueh's hand vigorously he said "I am Aitan ben Elchanan maBeit Menasheh of Sh'chem. In the name of the Master of the Children of Light, I welcome you to Secacah."

Realizing that he had been 'unclean' in the eyes of his host and had to be purified before touching flesh to flesh, Shueh apologized for his previous faux-pas. "I am not familiar with your purity laws here. I apologize for offering my unclean hand."

Aitan puffed his cheeks and waved his hands. "It is no matter. When one acts improperly but in ignorance, it is no sin." He led the way back through the portal into the original courtyard, and then across to the portal that led along the inside wall of the two-story building. Seen through some doors to the right was a large, circular cistern with channels leading to and from it. Aitan approached the wall to the right where a small, round sheet of metal was mounted on the wall. He rapped his knuckle against the sheet, causing it to emit a small tinny sound. Instantly a younger man dressed in the same fashion as Aitan appeared from a doorway. "Kedem," he said to the younger man, but pointing to Shel, "this is Shelyeshu'a, our visitor's manservant. See that he prepares his master's quarters and learns our ways."

Shueh, seeing Shel's confused glance, bowed slightly toward Kedem and said "He goes by Shel, and he is more my friend than my manservant, but I willingly give him to your care and keeping." Shueh let down his bag from off his shoulder and handed it to Shel.

Without a word, Kedem hustled back through his doorway with Shel and baggage in tow. In turn, Aitan gestured to the

opposite side of the passageway where another arch led to a passage on the far side of the two-story building. Shueh had seen three sides of it now. He wondered when or if he would enter it. Apparently the time was not yet, as Aitan led him into a long, low building on the other side of the small courtyard. Although the warren of doors, passageways, and walls was beginning to confuse Shueh's good sense of direction, he was beginning to doubt which direction he was headed in.

Shueh had to stoop a little to fit into the doorway. Ahead of him he found a long, narrow room. Light came from four low apertures near the wooden ceiling. It was a curious room, however. Into the walls was built a narrow shelf almost completely surrounding the room. The shelf was at waist level, and there were men seated on low stools all around the room. Each had a scroll laid out on the shelf before him and was pointing at the scroll with a small wooden *yad*, slowly following the lines of text. One of two of them bothered to look up as Shueh and Aitan entered, but most were oblivious to their entry. Just to the right of the entrance was a doorway into another room. This one not only had a wooden door, unlike most of the doorways, but the door was divided in half so that the bottom could be closed while the top remained open, as it was now. Aitan walked to the door and rapped at. Shueh could see a profile of heavy beard and long nose briefly protruding from the opening. But when Aitan had whispered something to him, he quickly disappeared. While he was gone, Aitan selected a *yad* from the ceramic jar on the the shelf next to the door and tapped it once or twice against the wall. But before long the profile reappeared, proffering two small scrolls into Aitan's waiting hands. Aitan turned and motioned for Shueh to sit in the one empty stool. When Shueh had sat, Aitan proffered the scrolls to Shueh, whispering "Would you prefer *devarim* or *sh'neim asar*?"

"I prefer *Yeshayahu*," Shueh replied. "But if you're asking me to read, I cannot."

"Your hands are clean, my friend," Aitan implored. "Go ahead, I would suggest *sh'neim asar*."

Shueh looked down in embarrassment, not only for himself, but that his host was being slow on the uptake. "When I say I

cannot read, I mean that I am unable to interpret the characters on the scroll. I have not learned my letters.”

Aitan’s lips parted in surprise. “How is this so?” he asked. “We have heard that you are able to quote *Torah* at great length. How else would you be able to do this except by reading?”

“Yes,” Shueh admitted, “but that is because I had a very good *rav* who spoke the words clearly in synagogue. I have an uncanny ability to remember everything I hear.”

Aitan’s eyes closed as his eyebrows raised and he shook his still gaping mouth. “I then must apologize in return. I had no idea you could not read.”

“It is no matter,” Shueh replied, quoting the man’s words back to him. “When one acts improperly but in ignorance, it is no sin.”

Aitan cocked his head slightly to the side and narrowed his gaze, his rheumy old eyes taking on a keen focus directly into Shueh’s eyes. “I perceive there is something special in you,” he replied after a long pause. “But come, let us leave this stuffy room to our brethren,” he said as he bustled back to the window to return the scrolls.

They exited through the door by which they had entered, and back to the passageway where Shel had departed, but then around another corner to a large courtyard with two immense basins, Shueh could not tell whether they were cisterns or *mikveh*. They were fed and apparently drained by water channels running around, apparently haphazardly. Most importantly, however, was a portico abutting up against one of the basins. There were low benches under the thatched roof and a thick cover of grapevines. The morning was already heating up, and the atmosphere inside the study had been stifling. Shueh took a seat on one of the benches while Aitan remained standing, pacing slowly back and forth. “It will be an hour or two before the brethren will finish their reading, and I admit, I should like to return to my reading as well. I am unsure of what I should do with you until then. Perhaps I can offer you a fresh cup of water?”

“From the cistern?” Shueh asked nervously. “I’ve never liked still waters for drinking.”

“Oh heavens, no,” Aitan exclaimed. “No, this water is for washing and planting and cooking. We have several firkins of fresh water from a spring brought up each morning. As a matter of fact, that is probably where your manservant is right now: helping lug our daily drinking water from Ein Feshkha.”

“I thank you for the offer of water, and am glad to know that it is fresh,” Shueh sighed, “But I regret that I cannot accept your offer of water, at least until after sundown.”

“You are fasting?” Aitan asked, once more surprised at his guest.

“Yes, I have been for over three weeks now,” Shueh admitted. “I plan to continue until *Shavuot*. I hope that is not an inconvenience for you.”

“I must admit, it is not an easy matter,” Aitan replied. “We take all our meals here communally and at set times. I will have to consult with the Master.” Aitan began to wring his hands. “But that too will have to wait. I must return to my reading.”

“By all means, have no second thoughts about me,” Shueh insisted. “I can care for myself. This spot is idyllic for a bit of quiet meditation.” As Aitan began to shuffle off, Shueh called out a question. “Am I allowed to go elsewhere, into that building for example?” Shueh asked, pointing at the two-story building.

Aitan grimaced and shook his head. “It is better if you stay here until someone comes for you.” Again he turned to walk away, but then paused. “However, if you must lighten yourself, you will find the place just outside the gate where we washed earlier. We only ask that you purify yourself upon reentering. You can see to that, nay?”

Shueh nodded in return. “I must say that prolonged daily fasting has taught my body to retain its water, so I will likely have no need. But thank you nonetheless.”

Aitan hurried away, looking grateful to finally be relieved of his charge. Shueh turned to face eastward over the walls of the compound, over which he could barely make out the mountains on the east side of the Salt Sea, with which he had become intimately familiar. He wondered about Eliyahu and Moshe, smiling as he remembered their companionship and antics. But in recalling the memory, he also reflected on the arid and inhospitable setting in which he had spent his fast thus far.

Comparing it with the comfortable bench, grapevines bobbing in the breeze, and water lapping gently in the basin was like the difference between heaven and the underworld, or 'the pit', as Yeshayahu referred to it. Yes, his previous encampment had been 'the pit.' He wasn't certain that he should call this one heaven yet, but he was inclined favorably in that direction. He pulled off his keffiyeh, rose from his seat and walked to the first basin that was probably a *mikveh*, because it had broad steps descending into it. He stepped in as far as the second step, cupped some of the cool water in his hands, and then splashed it on his forehead, running his fingers through his hair and rubbing his eyes.

"You seemed to have forgotten your ears," came a voice from behind him.

Shueh turned to see a tall, thin man dressed in simple elegance, but with some air of authority about him. He sensed at once this was the Master. He bowed his head in reverence and explained "I have already been purified, Master. I was simply enjoying the feel of the water, of which I have had so little these past few weeks. I hope I have not acted amiss."

"I am glad to see someone actually enjoying the waters," the Master smiled. "We Sons of Light take to the waters so frequently that, admittedly, it has become something of a chore for some of us. But if you are refreshed, please join me. We have things to discuss."

Shueh returned to the bench to fetch his keffiyeh and followed the Master back to the study, but went through the split door into a room with many wooden shelves to contain the scrolls, and another door off to the left. This place was a regular rabbit warren, Shueh decided. This final room was somewhat of a sanctum, he thought. It had a shelf surrounding most of the room, but it was meant for sitting, not holding scrolls. Curtains walled off the portion of the walls where there was no shelf. He imagined the curtains shrouded the entryway into yet more rooms.

The Master took a position in the middle of the bench on one wall and motioned for Shueh to sit on the bench along the wall at his left, close to him, but at an angle where they could converse.

“I have not introduced myself,” the Master began. “I am Menachem ben Shahar miBeit Binyamin of Giv'on. I have been Master of the Sons of Light for eight years. You are Yeshueh ben Yousef miBeit Yehuda of Natzrat, and friend of Yochanan ben Zekharyah who currently resides in Beth-Abara of Yordan. Yochanan says that there have been officials from the temple in Yerushalayim who have been asking after you. He is worried they mean you harm, because of the fact that you claim to be *Mashiach*. He sent you here to us, who are less prone to kill a messianic pretender, to test your claim. Have I understood all this correctly?”

Shueh, who had been holding his breath, found himself releasing it through puffed cheeks with wide eyes. This Master did not believe in small talk, but came right to the point. Shueh's mind raced back to when Yoni had asked him, point blank, whether he was *Mashiach*. Because of the knowledge he had been imparted to him while alone at Ein Ma'in, he was ready to answer heartily in the affirmative. But something whispered to him, like Moshe's faint hissing in the night, that he ought to be wise and careful. “You indeed have our names and lineages correct, but I believe it is up to you to prove whether I can properly bear the title of *Mashiach*.”

“Well answered,” the Master concluded. “While *bnei Yisrael* have been awaiting *Mashiach* for ages, our brotherhood has reason to believe that His time fast approaches. And it would be proper for Him to be made known here first, by those who await him most ardently. It is also within our power to broadcast His advent throughout the entire land most effectively. You know that our membership is found in every town and village throughout the land, yes?”

“Yes, I have known several of your brethren, both in my hometown and in other places where I have labored,” said Shueh warily. “But I am also aware that the *Perushim* not only have that same network of adherents, but unlike you, they are also present in what they would call ‘The Temple’, but which you call ‘the temple at Yerushalayim.’ Is there another temple? And would it not be more appropriate that *Mashiach*'s appearance be associated with what *bnei Yisrael* acknowledges as The Temple?”

The Master looked away from Shueh, focusing his eyes in the middle of the room for several long moments. Slowly his gaze turned and focused back on Shueh. "I see that my wisdom is not unmatched," he admitted with a raised eyebrow.

"Although I doubt that you have as much respect for the *Perushim* as you imply, and I note you do not refer to the *Tzadukim* at all, conveying even less respect, you still doubt that we, the Sons of Light, have an authority to administer the rites of the Sons of Tzaduk here in our purified sanctuary?"

"I may indeed possess a little more knowledge and perception than your average visitor," Shueh admitted, "But your years of experience and study in leading this distinctive fellowship has imparted great wisdom that my few years have not yet allowed me." Shueh saw a brief look of satisfaction flash across the Master's face. But it was immediately cloaked behind his mask of impassivity. "However, my quest to increase my knowledge and broaden my perception will at least cause me to prove your claims to authority just as much as you seek to prove my own claim."

Again the Master's gaze left Shueh to a nebulous place in the room. When he finally looked back at Shueh he said simply, "Claims."

"Pardon?" asked Shueh, sincerely unaware of what the Master meant.

"You make two claims," the Master explained. "Your first claim is monumental enough to cause great excitement mixed with the corresponding level of doubt. Your second claim, however, is frankly unbelievable."

Shueh knew he was referring to Shueh's long suspected but recently revealed knowledge of his parentage. That was a tall enough order for him to swallow, let alone a suspicious learned man. "Then let us leave it for now," Shueh offered.

"Then you deny it?" the Master shot back, leaning toward Shueh.

"I simply suggested we should not consider that claim for now," Shueh said calmly without reaction. "Should my first claim prove false, then the second need not even be considered. However, should you at some time come to the conclusion that I can rightly take up the claim to being *Mashiach*, then, and not

until then, will we even think of it. Does that sound acceptable to you, Master?"

"You are indeed wise beyond your years," the Master admitted, leaning his back against the wall. "The *kohen gadol* is not half as diplomatic as you." He paused as a smile lifted one corner of his mouth. "Perhaps if you don't make it as *Mashiach* we can see about replacing Qayyafa with you?"

"You would have to wear a *Romim* toga to accomplish that miracle," Shueh chuckled at the obvious joke.

In turn, the Master laughed softly at Shueh's retort. "Me in a toga! I don't think I have the arms for it," he said as he held out his arms to mime the stance the *Romim* were wont to take while appearing important in their official acts. "But come," his face became sober again. "In order for you to prove us, you need to be able to learn about us, and you will do this so much faster if you can read our writings instead of sitting and listening to our rambling words. Aiten says you will be with us for another two weeks. With your knowledge and perception, I'm certain we can have you reading at least at a basic level. Can we, the Sons of Light, offer you the opportunity to learn to read?"

This was a splendid surprise to Shueh. "I can think of nothing better," he replied enthusiastically. "I have long yearned for such an opportunity."

"Then we will make it so," the Master concluded. "I will have Aiten become your tutor to make up for his mistake of embarrassing you in the study. But our time is not our own prior to our midday meal. He will not be able to tutor you until the afternoons. However, it is already known to me that you are a stonemason of some repute. Is that correct?"

"It is," Shueh replied. But anticipating what the Master was going to ask, he volunteered "I'm certain there are walls and stones that need repair or dressing? How can I be of help?"

"Good man," the Master pronounced. "Your first task will be to repair the kiln. A few of its stones are threatening to fall into the fire. Perhaps you could take a look at that?"

"I would be more than happy to do so," Shueh replied, genuinely happy to be able to use his skills he thought he might never use again. "Just point me in the right direction for tools and supplies."

“I’ve got some matters pressing on me at the moment,” the Master shrugged, “But if you will return to the courtyard where I found you, I will send someone around shortly to instruct you. Can you find your way back? I know some people totally lose their heads in this citadel of ours.”

“I can find my way back,” Shueh assured him. But as he bowed to take his leave, he remembered something else. “I’m sorry, but Aiten mentioned some problem about my fasting being at odds with your mealtime.”

“Ah yes, he did mention that to me,” the Master admitted. “But I will discuss that with him later this afternoon. I’m certain we can work something out that will suit both of our needs.”

“My thanks to you for everything you have already done,” Shueh said, “as well as all the things you will do. You are a wise and generous man.”

The Master smiled curtly and shook Shueh’s hand. Shueh then quickly found his way back out to the courtyard, remembering each turn and finally being able to orient them to make a little more sense of the compound’s layout. He returned to the bench in the shade where he had sat previously. His mind was racing with the thought that he would finally be able to learn to read. He need not worry about reading anything in *Torah*, as that was already firmly in his memory. But now other sources might open to him. And once he was able to make sense of his own letters, he might be able to transfer that learning to the *Romim* and *Goy* letters. As he looked out, now upon the unfamiliar hills to the west, he imagined the unknown places that reading might take him. He wanted to exult, to tell someone. Oh that Miri were here! That thought brought him instantly back to the ground. She was probably approaching Yericho right now. So far away, both in time and space. His heart yearned for a time and place where she could ever be at his side. He bowed his head and acknowledged to himself that that time might not come for a very, very long time.

20 Iyyar - The Lord had told Samuel in his ear 1

Samuel 9:15

“Perhaps you know Nachman ben Yoel?” Andreas suggested. “He had tables in both Kfar Nahum and Hatsor.”

“You can suggest as many names as you like,” the money-changer shook his head. “My connections are mostly along the coast.”

“But your colleague down the street said you had a network stretching north,” Andreas sighed.

“The northern parts of the coast, all the way to Tsor and Tsidon,” the man boasted. “Perhaps you should try Abihu’s table. He is the one under the yellow shade.”

“He is the first one we tried,” Andreas said wearily. “You don’t know anyone who has connections in Tiberias, or anywhere in the Galil?”

“Twenty years ago, when Herodos *HaGadol* was on the throne,” The money-changer explained, “I could easily have said yes. But now that the *Romim* have divided the kingdom, Herodus Antipas added a tariff between administrative districts. The Galil doesn’t drive that much business, so a lot of connections have been lost.”

“Do you have any idea when Alpheus’ table will re-open?” Andreas asked. “We did business with him last month, but I can’t find him anywhere.”

“Yes, he would have been very helpful, being based around Genesseret,” he replied. “I don’t know that he will return. His agent said something about the distance being too great. Too little trust at that distance.”

“I thank you for your assistance,” Andreas sighed. “You were pretty much our last hope.”

“Do you have anything of value to pawn?” came the helpful reply.

Andreas just shook his head as he walked away, seeking out the fountain where he had left Miri while he tried to conduct her business. She had, of course, wanted to come and help, but Andreas had had to remind her that even if it was her money, in this man’s world such business should be concluded by men. When he caught sight of her, chin elevated and looking

hopefully back and forth through the crowd, she had beamed a hopeful smile. But when she saw his downcast face, her smile fled and she slumped back down on the bench.

"I'm afraid that was our last hope, Miri," Andreas said dejectedly. "Alpheus has packed up his table and gone back to the Galil, and none of the brokers has connections there anymore. You're certain you don't want to pawn your amulet?"

"Absolutely not," Miri retorted defiantly. "First of all it wouldn't fetch even a dinari, and secondly, Shueh made it for me. How can I ever part with it?"

"I've suggested it before, but now that we've hit rock bottom, let me suggest it again. I can loan you money. I transferred my accounts here last year. I don't even need to go to the tables. I can get it directly from my broker."

"You know how Shueh feels about loans," she replied. "It would be very easy to do, and you know I would willingly accept it, but in Shueh's stead, I don't think I can accept that."

"If you want, I can put you up here in a room and return to Secacah to inform him of the situation," Andreas suggested. "I'm sure he'll see the necessity and relent in this case."

"Unfortunately, I see no other alternative," she said as she gathered the strength to stand up. "Come, show me to your friend's home."

But Andreas put a hand on her shoulder to stop. "You have walked far in the past two days. I am not certain my friend has an opening, and his home is a good walk from here. If he doesn't have room, I'll have to find another place. You stay here until I come back to fetch you."

"Sara was fortunate to be matched with you, Andreas," Miri said. "You are truly a good man, no matter what I thought of you before."

"Sara has had much in the making of the man I am today," Andreas admitted.

"The sooner all men would admit that," Miri teased, "the better off they would be."

As Andreas departed into the crowd, Miri noticed a woman observing them from the stall next to the fountain. She was obviously a rich woman. Her fine clothes covered a shapely but well-fed frame and her ears, neck, and wrists were well arrayed

in gold and silver. Miri had seen her earlier at a stall that sold silk scarves, something that Miri could not even think about even touching. But now she was looking at Miri while the vendor's daughter rubbed an ointment on her outstretched hands. Miri bowed her head politely and wondered what it might be like to have a fragrant balm to keep her hands soft. But as she was looking at her hands, the woman seated herself beside her. She smelled wonderful. It was a mix of jasmine flower and cinnamon.

"You'll pardon me," the woman said, "but do they allow rich ladies like me to sit at this fountain?"

Miri was horrified. Was she sitting where she should not? If a rich person sat near you, were you supposed to vacate your seat? She began to gather her things to flee when the woman chuckled deeply in her throat. "Relax, my love, I was only making a joke. Rich feet get just as tired as those of the working class. As a matter of fact, with as little time as we spend on them, and the bulk they have to transport, they get more tired even faster. Will you allow me to sit with you?"

Miri was still flustered. "But *HaG'virah*, it is I who should beg for your leave," Miri said haltingly, remembering the word for 'my lady' from her days near Tiberias.

"You just have, and you may have it," the woman said in a friendly voice. "Besides, I believe you can be of help to me."

"I will serve you in any way I can," Miri whispered as she tentatively took her seat again.

The woman put forth her ample hand saying "I am called Shoshannah, but my friends just call me Shannah."

"I am pleased to meet you, Mistress Shoshannah," said Miri, nervously taking the woman's offered hand. Should she kiss it? Or just grasp it for a moment?

Before Miri could decide, the woman said, "Your hands, my dear. Such beautiful skin. Pardon my insensitivity, but I assumed your hands would be rough from labor. And please, do call me Shannah. It would please me more than official names and titles. They are so stuffy."

Miri blushed deeply. She had never had such an interaction with a woman of means. She had seen a few in the streets of

Tiberias, especially at the theater, but they had never deigned to speak with her, except to shout commands.

“But even your hands could benefit from a little kindness,” she remarked. Then, turning to the vendor at the stall next to them, she said loudly, “I’ll take two shekels of that hand lotion, but you must put a sample on this lovely woman’s hands.”

The vendor’s daughter came out from behind the stall, smiling but hesitant, and spooned a small dollop of ointment onto Miri’s outstretched hands. She rubbed it between her fingers. It was smooth, but neither watery nor viscous. It smelled of some flower she did not know. But as she rubbed into her palms and along the backs of her hands, the lotion was swiftly absorbed, leaving her skin feeling soft, but not a hint of moisture. She found herself cooing in delight.

“I don’t know what to say, Mistress Shannah,” Miri gushed, unable to leave off the woman’s title.

“Seeing the delight in your face is payment enough,” Shannah chuckled. “But, like I said before, there is something you can help me with. I overheard you say something about your husband being in Secacah? I am headed down that way for a week or so of leisure. But I have never been before. I’m hoping you can help me know what to take.”

“Why of course,” Miri replied, relieved that the required task involved only advice and not some menial task. “Do you know where you’ll be staying?”

“My husband says its name is Ein Feshkha,” Shannah said, “but I have no idea where that is. Do you?”

“I’m very sorry, but I have not heard of it. I have recently spent some weeks at a place called Ein Ma’in, but it was a camp for people of my class, not a resort for, for...” Miri’s voice trailed off, not knowing the proper way to refer to the rich when speaking to a rich person.

“For silly, fat, rich people like me? Shannah winked at Miri. “We’re both women, my love. We all have to gird our loins and strap our breasts the same way. What clothing do you recommend? Should I cover up or be a little flirty and leave my shins and forearms exposed?”

“The best thing to wear is muslin, of course,” Miri recommended. “Besides being soft and light, it wicks the

perspiration away. And if you dare to take to the waters, you'll find it dries very rapidly. But I wouldn't wear it too short. The sun is very intense near the sea." Looking at Shannah's fair skin, she remarked "Your skin is almost like the *Goy*. If you leave it out in the sun, it will be as crisp as fresh *matzah* before you know it."

"Well, I'm glad that I asked," Shannah almost giggled. "I would have needed more than two shekels worth of hand lotion in that case."

"But your eyes will also need protection," Miri remembered having to shade her eyes with her hand almost constantly. "I saw a cart down that way that was selling a shade that fits closely to your forehead," she said pointing up the road. "I've never tried it myself, but I'm thinking it would be worth a fitting?"

For the next hour the women browsed the stalls, carts, and shops in the market. The visor fitted well enough and was worth the price even if it didn't end up working, although the vendor guaranteed its effectiveness. Muslin outerwear and underwear were located, tried on, purchased, and sent to Shannah's rooms in the citadel. Fortified wine was ordered to be sent to Ein Feshkha, as the water was rumored to be somewhat sulfuric. The wine would be powerful enough to dilute it and make it palatable, at least. New sandals woven of straw and with a thinner sole were purchased and immediately worn in order to test and break in. And since shopping is such hard work, the women soon found themselves seated at a food counter where the proprietress served them samples of fish with a selection of tangy, salty, and spicy dipping sauces.

"So tell me about your husband," Shannah said as he daintily dipped her fingers in the washbowl. "Your brother said he was in Secacah? Is he a laborer there, or one of the priests perhaps?" Shannah paused, her eyes flew open, and she continued in a breathless voice, "Tell me he's not one of those men who leaves his wife behind? You're much too young and beautiful for that!"

Miri began to laugh, but instantly dissolved into a coughing fit, having inhaled a bit of fish. In between coughs she managed to say "Not brother...husband's friend...No, heavens no...not a priest...He is just visiting...Secacah...He is a stone...mason from the...Galil." Pausing a moment to regain her composure,

she then finished “He and Shel just entered Secacah this morning.”

“Shel?” Shannah asked.

“Short for Shelyeshu’a,” Miri responded. “Shueh’s self-appointed body-man. A long story you don’t want to hear.”

Finding her a cup of wine, Shannah proffered it to Miri, who sipped and dabbed at her eyes. “A mason with a body man? He must be quite good. He was hired to do some masonry at Secacah then?”

Miri breathed roughly and sipped a bit more wine. “I’m certain he will not be able to keep himself from fixing up the stonework while he’s there,” she conceded, “but no, he is there for a different reason.”

Miri fought within herself to try to decide what and how much to share with this woman. She was obviously rich and powerful. There was no telling who her husband might be. Perhaps he was just a merchant, but he could also be an official. Shueh’s mission would eventually become public knowledge. It might not hurt to have a friend in high places. But if she was married to the wrong man, this might be an unwise move. Miri knew she was taking a long time to reply, but she was amazed at the woman’s patience. Most women could not abide silence. They would dismiss the difficult question or steer the conversation elsewhere. But not Shannah. She just sat and offered a helpful smile in complete silence. Miri sensed somehow that she could be trusted. That same feeling she had felt after being baptized warmed her chest.

“For years my Shueh has been the hardest working and sweetest husband,” she finally opened up. “He has accepted my barrenness with love and dignity without a single word of not being able to raise a son. He keeps *Torah* with exactness. He treats me more like his friend than his wife. But recently, just in the last few months, he has changed. He is not less, but becoming more. It is like he has discovered a calling later in life. I don’t know that he will ever cut stone again. Frankly, I don’t know what he’ll do, and it scares me to think of the future. But somehow I know that I can trust him. He has given himself to fasting and prayer for the past several weeks to more closely approach the Divine. The reason he’s at Secacah is not exactly

clear to me, but it has something to do with him choosing how he will direct his steps in days to come.”

Shannah selected another morsel of fish and casually dipped it in the tangy sauce while she slowly blinked her long lashes several times, obviously considering her own reply. After chewing and swallowing the fish, she touched her lips with a napkin and said “He is choosing just what sort of *Mashiach* he will be, is that it?”

Miri gasped and covered her mouth in horror. Had she said something about this? No, she had chosen her words very carefully. How had Shannah known this?

Shannah reached out with both hands to cup Miri’s cheeks. “Shush, my love, there is no need to fear. My husband’s business has sent us here because he has had tidings of your husband and what he, or other certain people, are saying about him. My husband is also a good man, although he sometimes must make hard decisions that I don’t agree with. I don’t think he means your man any harm. And if he does, he’ll have to go through me first.”

But Miri was still confused. “How did you know?”

“First of all, if your husband should prove to be Adonai’s servant, then that man’s wife would be equally yoked to him. You are among the finest women I have ever met, Miri. You are generous, trusting, sweet-spoken, and quite wise. But it is also known to me that the man my husband seeks is a stonemason, and that he has retreated into the Salt Sea wilderness for an extended period of fasting. I myself am not the brightest woman around, but I know how to read people. Wife of a fasting stonemason seeking advice from holy men in the desert? Who else *could* you be?”

Miri felt relief flooding her whole soul. Tears welled up in her eyes, not the spatter of pressure from coughing, but pulled from deep in her breast, it seemed. They cleansed her mind and allowed her to see clearly. How else *could* this woman have known who she was, unless Adonai had willed it? She had been right to trust her feelings and reveal what she did, and in the way she did.

“Well, now you know,” Miri said. “Now what will you do?”

“I am not sure what I will do in the end,” Shannah said. “I’m certain that right now I will provide you with the funds you were seeking from the money-changer. And before you tell me that you will repay my gift, I’ll ask you to look at me again. Do I look like I need the repayment of a loan? People like me need a good cause to give our money to, and yours, even if it proves not to be what is expected, yours is a good cause. How much do you need?”

“Shueh is planning on staying at Secacah until *Shavuot* while I stay at Beth-Abara. That is a good two weeks. I am hoping we will head directly back to the Galil after that, so enough to cover three weeks of food and lodging?”

“I have an inkling that you two will be making a detour to Yerusahalayim for at least a week, so make it four,” Shannah concluded. “And forgive me for not knowing how much your weekly expenses are. But I’m assuming four aureus will be sufficient, and maybe allow you to buy something nice for yourself and your husband?”

Shannah reached into her bosom and retrieved a coin purse from which she extracted four gold coins. Miri’s eyes goggled as they were placed in her trembling palm. This was enough to sustain them for four months. “Mistress Shannah, this is too much.”

Shannah lowered her gaze in mock sternness. “You want me to receive fewer blessings for giving you less?”

“Oh no,” Miri responded. “I just, it is so much. What will your husband think?”

“My husband will think what I tell him to,” Shannah stated blankly. “And besides, it’s my money, not his, so he has very little say. But he will be well disposed when I tell him that I know where your husband is and how long he plans on staying there. What will happen after that? I do not know. But I trust that it will be whispered to either or both of us how we should act. Do you not agree?”

Before Miri could answer, she heard Andreas shouting her name from up the street. He came into the fish shop breathing heavily, as if he had been running. “Where have you been?” he panted.

“I have been in the service of *HaG’virah* Shoshannah of Yerushalayim,” Miri answered tartly. “I gave up waiting for you and we went shopping together.”

“I beg your pardon, *HaG’virah*,” Andreas bowed. “I did not realize you were together.”

“You are pardoned,” Shannah dismissed his concern. “Your friend’s wife has been an absolute delight this whole afternoon. I know you have been searching for lodging for the night, somewhere you can leave her in safety while you scuttle off on an errand. But I am happy to report that you don’t need to go on that errand anymore, and you can pick any lodging place you like for tonight, because you will be near to her and can see to her comfort and safety personally.”

Andreas opened and closed his mouth several times, only able to say “How?”

“Oh stop gasping like these fish here,” Shannah tutted “and put some fish in your gob.” Shannah delicately retrieved a small silver coin from her purse and smacked it on the counter. Then she retrieved another coin and pushed it at Andreas. “This should cover lodging for the night.”

With that, she hopped down off her stool with more energy that could be expected of a woman her age and girth. “I’ll send a message to Miri of Beth-Abara should I think of anything,” she said over her shoulder as she departed. “But remember, you are the wiser one. Send for me in Ein Feshkha when you have it figured out.”

Andreas watched her disappear into the crowd, and then stared back and forth between Miri and the coin in his hand. Finally he gave up, shook his head, and plopped himself down in Shannah’s stool. “This should be a good story,” he said, “but I’m sure it will go down better after I have eaten.” With that he reached for the basket of grilled fish that had just been placed in front of it, dipped a filet deeply in the spicy sauce, and stuffed the entire thing in his mouth.

Miri looked away from the spectacle of his puffed cheeks and sauce running down his chin to secretly admire the gold coins still in her hand. She then put them into her own bosom, sipped a little wine, and began to relate her story.

Chapter 5

Author's Notes

When did Jesus learn to read? At the beginning of his ministry he was called upon to read from a scroll in the synagogue of his hometown, Nazareth. It is interesting to note that the synagogue in this small town even owned an Isaiah scroll. Unlike our Bibles that can be held in a single hand, even the five books of Torah were likely each contained on their own scroll. This was obviously a cost that had to be borne and was part of the endowment that would have been set aside to establish a synagogue, but additional scrolls were enormously expensive, and were likely a luxury for most small towns. Isaiah would obviously have been one of the first additional scrolls to be purchased. So it is not that surprising that Jesus could be called to read the daily reading from Isaiah 61. What is surprising is that he could read it.

Literacy was extremely rare at this time. William V. Harris has suggested that perhaps 10% of Jewish men at this time could read. However, this rate would have been highly skewed toward affluent city dwellers. It was they who participated in the “white collar” professions that might entail reading. Poor boys, and especially those who dwelt in rural areas, would have had little reason to invest their time in learning to read. What was there for them to practice on? The only written media were expensive, hand-copied scrolls, and were probably only represented by the scrolls in the synagogue. I am therefore conjecturing that Jesus, who was a “blue-collar” worker, never had the means, opportunity, or need of becoming literate. But according to scripture, by the time he reached his ministry, he was literate. Where and when did he learn to read? I can think of no better time than when he was preparing himself for his ministry: during his 40 day fast. As with all things surrounding Jesus, his path to literacy would probably have been miraculously short, what with his superior mind. The average illiterate adult can take up to three months to be able to read and comprehend in his mother tongue. I imagine it took slightly less time for Jesus.

And what a place to learn! The caves around Qumran, from which were extracted the Dead Sea Scrolls, accounted for every book in the Hebrew Bible with the exception of Nehemiah and Ruth, although a fragment of Ezra, the companion book of Nehemiah, was found. Some books, like Psalms and Isaiah, had more than 20 copies. And these are what were found in the caves. It is impossible to imagine the size of their active library within the compound.

A mile or two south of the ruins of Qumran is the modern nature preserve of Einot Tzukim, known in Herodian times as Ein Feshkha. The spring there, producing enough water to stock a well-watered nature preserve, is now brackish. But it is not difficult to imagine that during various periods, depending on the level of the Salt Sea, the water might be fresh. I have imagined that, as archaeological remains dating from around this time show several buildings here. And although hygienic bathing was looked up on less favorably in Herodian times, people of all ages and epochs have delighted in floating around in the extremely buoyant waters of the Salt Sea. Why would not the hyper rich of Herod's day have found a way to establish a bathing resort on the shores of the Salt Sea convenient to Jericho?

22 Iyyar - So that the people understood what was being read

Nehemiah 8:8

Shueh was sitting toe to toe with Aitan in a small and stuffy room near the main study room. Shueh could tell that Aitan was both excited to be doing something different than his normal routine of reading silently and alone, but also nervous about teaching another adult how to read. Aitan had told him that before he had joined the brotherhood he had had sons he had taught to read as they approached their *bar mitzvah*, but he had never taught a full-grown man before.

Aitan had a small scroll in his hand. It was not much wider than an outstretched hand, and its thickness showed it not to contain many chapters. "These are the writings of Ezra and Nechemyah," he said as he unrolled the scroll almost to its end. "They were the builders of the second temple which lasted half a millennium before Herodos corrupted it."

"I am not familiar with their words," Shueh admitted. "Are they part of *Torah*?"

"I'm sure you're using that word to refer to the holy writings," Aitan said as he arranged the scroll on his lap so Shueh could see the passage to which he had opened. "But here we can be precise. *Torah* refers only to the writings of Moshe. The remainder of the books find their way into two different collections."

"I am sorry," Shueh interjected, "like you say, I should be more precise. I should have asked whether Ezra and Nechemyah were part of either *Nevi'im* or *Ketuvim*."

"They belong to the *Ketuvim*" Aitan explained, "but unlike *Shir Hashirim*, *Rut*, *Eikhah*, or *Kohelet*, they are not part of the readings in the synagogue each year. And since you have told me that you have learned scripture from hearing it read, I picked one I thought you may not have heard before. Seems I was right," he chuckled in self satisfaction. "Here it is. Here is your first lesson." With his *yad* he traced a couple lines of letters in the scroll. "Does this mean anything to you?"

Shueh stared at the letters on the roll.

ויקראו בספר בתורת האלהים מפרש ושום שכל ויבינו במקרא:

“I know one traces the letters from sunrise to sunset,” Shueh murmured, reaching out and almost touching the scroll with his finger, moving from right to left. “I also know each symbol is a separate sound, but there appear to be many more sounds in our language than the small number of symbols here.”

“Do you know how many symbols there are?” Aitan asked.

“I make out eight ten of them,” Shueh said, still staring at the scroll, “if what you are specifying are the symbols between the one that looks like two dots on top of each other. But if you include that symbol, then nine ten.”

“Hm,” Aitan scratched his head, “I count five ten. How did you arrive at eight ten?”

Taking his own *yad* in his hand, Shueh pointed as he counted aloud. When he counted the dot wrapped under the second character as number three, Aitan stopped him. “I see, I see,” he murmured. “It is hard for those of us who have been reading for years to see things through new eyes. You have pointed at the dot, or *dagesh* and counted it as its own letter. These tiny symbols do not specify their own sound, but tell you how to modify the sound of the letter with it. I’ll explain more later, but do you see all these other dots?” Aitan said as he pointed to the remaining ten dots. “Again, they are not separate letters, but tell you how to pronounce the letter.”

Understanding dawned in Shueh’s head. “Ah! That’s how you get so many different sounds with so few symbols.”

“Exactly,” Aitan nodded. “Again, I’ll explain it in depth later on, but there is actually a very famous story right here in two letters, the two different versions of *shin*. Do you remember the story of how Jephthah protected Gilead against a band of Ephraimites? He caught some of them trying to cross the Yarden to get home, but he couldn’t tell the difference between them and his own men just by looking at them. So he asked them what they were trying to do. When they said ‘We are trying to cross the *sibboleth*,’ he had them killed. If they had said it after the Gileadite manner, they would have said *shibboleth*.’ Do you see

the letter that looks kind of like a three-candle menorah? This first one has the dot over the right side. That means you pronounce it right, like the Gileadites, or SH as in *shibboleth*. But the next two symbols just have the dot on the left side, and the left is always wrong, like SS or *sibboleth*.”

Shueh had raised his left hand with thumb and two fingers extended so both he and Aitan could look at the back of his hand. He pointed with the *yad* over his thumb and said “SH.” Then he moved the *yad* to point over his middle finger and said “SS.”

“Exactly,” Aitan confirmed. Then he reached out with his own *yad* and pointed to the thumb and said “Good.” Then he pointed over the middle finger and said “Bad.” When Shueh didn’t quite understand, he turned to look at Aitan’s face. He was giving Shueh a sheepish grin, waiting for him to get the joke.

It took Shueh a minute, but when he got it, he shook his head and rolled his eyes. “You know I’m never going to forget that, right?”

“Doesn’t matter how it sticks in your head,” Aitan chuckled. “Just that it does.” He then returned his *yad* to point to the scroll. “These are the different letters in this passage,” he said as he counted up to fifteen, skipping duplicate letters.

Shueh was still confused. “But there are two that you skipped,” he said.

Aitan frowned and furrowed his brow. “Which ones?” he asked.

Shueh first pointed to the space between the first and second words.

“That is simply a space between each word,” Aitan explained. “It is not a character in itself.”

“But our scrolls in Natzrat do not have such spaces. It was simply an unending continuation of characters.”

“Then your scrolls are ancient,” Aitan nodded as understanding dawned on him in turn. “In the past, because of the limited room on a scroll and the expense of the leather to write upon, it has been the tradition to leave no space between words. The Sons of Light feel it is more important to bring ready understanding than to save money. Yes, an experienced reader can tease out the separation between words in his head, but the scriptures are meant to be read aloud. If you’re having to puzzle

out where one word ends and the next one begins while reading aloud, it is not particularly enjoyable for your audience.”

Shueh nodded in agreement. “A space is not a character in itself, but just a separation between words. But what about this one?” Shueh pointed to the second letter in the last word.

Aitan’s brow did not furrow at this, but reddened a little. “I apologize, I skipped that one because it is just a different form of *mem*, this letter here,” he said pointing to the last letter in fourth and sixth words. “Apparently, years and years ago, when the words all ran together without spaces, someone had the idea to make the final letter of each word look different. I don’t know if that is true, but I can think of no other reason to have some letters that look different if they come at the end of the word. Today we have only five letters. *Mem* is one of them. Here, let me show you.”

Aitan reached into the breast of his tunic and pulled out a rolled up scrap of leather. He unrolled it and placed it over the scroll on his lap. “I have written out all the different letters for you.”

Shueh looked closely at the scrap. He noted that it looked as if it had been torn from another scroll from which the previous writing had been scraped or washed. The letters that Aitan had penned on the scrap were definitely legible, but he could faintly make out the previous characters. He caught it up in his hand and rotated it against the meager sun’s rays that penetrated into their room, trying to make out the faint characters.

“Oh don’t worry about what was there before,” Aitan protested. “Part of our job here in Secacah is to renew decaying scrolls. Last year I made a new copy of the writings of Yoel. When the new copy is ready and it has passed under several eyes to verify its accuracy, the old scroll can be scraped and reused. This one was so old it is barely worth anything, so I have copied out for you a listing of all the letters.”

א מ ש

ב ג ד כ פ ר ת

ה ו ז ח ט י ל נ ס ע צ ק

Shueh looked at the newly penned letters. There were three groupings of letters. The first had three, the second seven, and the final one twelve. “How absolutely Hebraic,” he commented. “Twenty two letters, but composed of the mystical numbers of three, seven, and twelve. Why the groupings?”

Pointing at the first three, which included the two letters Shueh had already learned, Aitan explained “These are the mother letters. We associate them with air, water, and fire. They are *aleph*, *mem*, and *shin*. As with all letters, the sound at the beginning of each of those names is the sound the letter makes.”

“*Aleph*, *mem*, *shin*,” Shueh repeated, pointing his own *yad* at each letter.

“This is just a scrap, my boy,” Aitan said, pushing away the *yad* and touching the leather with his finger. “I left room down the side for you to practice writing your own letters later, so you’re going to be touching it quite a bit.”

Aitan continued, pointing out the group of seven letters, naming each one and explaining that these letters had two different pronunciations, like the letter *beit* that sometimes pronounced like the beginning of *beit*, but at other times like the sound at the end of the word *rav*, depending on if they had a little dot, or *dagesh* with it. Shueh dutifully repeated the sounds of both versions of each letter. The final group of twelve letters, those who have but a single pronunciation, were named, sounded out, and repeated. After this task was done, Aitan sat back and stretched his arms. “Now, try to repeat them all back to me as best you can. I’ll help you when you forget or get it wrong.”

Shueh began pointing at the mother letters, naming each one, and repeating the sound the letter represented. Aitan smiled and nodded. But as Shueh repeated the process for all seven double letters and the remaining twelve simple letters, Aitan’s jaw steadily dropped. When Shueh had finished, he was dumbfounded for several moments. Finally he looked down, raised an eyebrow, and muttered “This isn’t going to take as long as I thought.”

“I’m sorry, master,” Shueh apologized. “Did I get something wrong?”

“No,” Aitan shrugged his shoulders, “you got it perfect. I was going to leave you alone to practice while I went to lighten

myself, but it seems that is not necessary.” But then a gleam entered his eye. He looked sharply back at Shueh. “I have an assignment for you,” he said. “I want you to see if you can sound out this passage of Nechemyah based on the letters you have just learned. I will excuse myself for a while. When I return, I will see how well you have learned.”

Aitan stood slowly and shuffled out of the room. Shueh imagined he had quite a long time, what with the distance Aitan had to travel, the speed at which he went, and the way age affected old men’s bladders. He started stringing the sounds of the first word together. He had to start over several times, and when he was done, he wasn’t sure of the word, but it had something to do with reading. The second word being shorter came almost instantly, the word for book or school, depending on how you pronounced it. “If I could just hear this, I could repeat it back much faster,” he thought to himself. “But I guess I have the ability to learn things instantly through my ears, where it is more difficult through my eyes.” He growled inside at the extra effort it took to learn this. He usually learned things so quickly. But before Aitan could return, he had sounded his way through all the letters, occasionally having to refer back to the reference scrap to jog his memory. At first the resulting sound did not make any sense, but as he tried different open sounds between the letters, and emphasized different parts of the word, it would finally make sense. He thought he had the meaning of the whole passage, and had begun to work through the words following the two dots that marked the end of the passage. But he heard Aitan’s shuffle, and so reviewed the words one last time.

Shueh held the scroll high while Aitan lowered himself to his seat, and then placed it so they could both see the words. “Let’s see how far you have gotten,” Aitan puffed.

Shueh took up his *yad*, pointed at the first word, and slowly read: “So they read - in the book - of the law - of God - precisely - and gave - the sense - causing them to understand - the reading.”

Shueh looked up at Aitan with an expression that awaited not praise, but explanation and teaching. Aitan had obviously chosen this passage because it had to do with reading and

understanding the *Torah*; exactly what Aitan was teaching him. But all Shueh saw was Aitan's mouth gaping. "How?" he said. "How? This is not possible." Aitan scanned the scroll once more as if trying to find something he had seen before. "No one has ever..." he began, and then he sat up with a start. "Wait," he barked. "No it is not possible." Then he cupped his hand to the side of his mouth and shouted out the doorway "Binyamin? Bino! Did you do this? You fox, you." Turning to Shueh he said "Brother Binyamin loves to play practical jokes. I'm sorry he put you up to this."

Shueh just looked at him blankly, though. "No master, I did not cheat."

"Oh, it's not cheating if some skunk puts you up to it," Aitan said through gritted teeth.

"But no one coached me," Shueh pleaded.

"Oh, no? Then read the next passage for me. Right now." Aitan demanded. As Shueh started to repeat the words he had already learned, Aitan stopped him. "No. Bino would have thought of that too. Read the previous passage."

Aitan rolled the top of the scroll back a little, revealing words not yet seen. Shueh began sounding out the first word, then stopped and smiled and pointed at himself. "Yeshueh," he beamed, then turned back to the scroll and sounded out "and Binu - and Ser, no Sheribya..."

But Aitan cut him off. "It is Bani, not Binu, but you couldn't know, and Binyamin would have." He sucked his teeth as he shook his head. "How is it possible that in a single hour a person can learn to read?"

"The scripture itself has pronounced the reason," Shueh said, pointing to the first word of the passage he had just begun to read. "Yeshueh: God helps." He gently placed his hand on Aitan's shoulders. "With God, all things are possible, my master."

Aitan nodded blankly, but then remembered that he had not yet finished his instruction. "We still have to teach you the final letters, my boy," he sighed.

"I thought there were only two and twenty," Shueh said quizzically.

“No, not final as in more at the end of the collection, but final as in what some of the same two and twenty letters look like if they come at the end of a word.”

“Why are there letters that look differently...” Shueh started to ask.

“Don’t ask me,” interrupted Aitan, shaking his head. “No matter how old you think I am, I wasn’t there when these letters were devised. But it might have had something to do with signalling the end of a word before there were spaces between the words? I don’t know.”

Aitan wrote another line of five letters beneath the three lines he had already written, and then drew a spidery line connecting each final letter with its counterpart. “They look very similar,” he assured Shueh, “so it should not be hard to add these to what you have already learned.”

Shueh traced the connecting lines between each of the letters. “What are these five letters named?” he asked.

“They’re named the same, but you just say ‘final’ after the letter name. *Kaf* final, *mem* final, and so on,” Aitan assured him. “You don’t need to worry about them being named or making any different sounds.”

Shueh barely heard him, as he was comparing his little scrap of parchment to the scroll, double-checking to make sure that the letter sounds and shapes made sense in his mind. Aitan sat in silence, watching him for several minutes. Suddenly he inhaled deeply, grabbed Shueh’s knees, and said “The student who performs well deserves a treat,” he smiled. “Let me get you one.” With that, Aitan slowly stood up, bracing himself on Shueh’s knees and then his proffered forearm. Without looking back, he waved over his shoulder and said “I’ll be right back.” For the few moments he was gone, Shueh took up the scroll again and began sounding out the names. The next one, serendipitously, was Yamin. Shueh chuckled inside, deciding he wanted to meet Brother Benyamin and sample his sense of humor. Next came Akub, or was it Akuv? He closed his eyes and imagined the symbols Aitan had written on the scrap of leather. Just seeing it in his mind helped him to remember. Since *beit* was one of the double symbols... His thought was cut off as he heard Aitan scuffing and breathing heavily in the passageway. Something

urged Shueh to stand, and sure enough, when he did, he saw Aitan struggling with an exceptionally large scroll. Shueh gently and carefully relieved him of the burden, and then took his seat, reverently placing the scroll in his lap. “What is this?” he asked in a voice full of wonder.

“You said you liked Yeshayahu best,” the old man wheezed. “So I got you Yeshayahu.”

Shueh’s eyes shot wide with amazement. He looked down at the scroll in his lap and made motions to start unrolling it.

But Aitan gently slapped his fingers away. “It may be alright to unroll Ezra Nechemya in this little closet,” he tutted, “But Yeshayahu? No, we shall take it back to the *lishkat haSefarim* where you can unroll it with reverence, and with the brethren read it. Here, give me the smaller scroll, and we shall go there together.”

Shueh got the feeling that not only was Aitan allowing him to read his favorite book in the *Nevi'im*, but because it was going to take place among the other studying brethren, Aitan was showing off how well he had been able to teach his neophyte to read. But he had been a good and patient teacher, Shueh thought, and he did not begrudge him his triumph at all.

They wound their way through the several passageways and doors that led back to the *lishkat*. When they entered, Aitan gave a slight cough, at which the brethren looked up. Seeing the newcomer with a hefty scroll in his arms, most of them decided to watch him to see what he would do with it. Aitan ushered him to an empty place, presumably his, and motioned for him to sit. Shueh dutifully sat, placing the scroll on the shelf and eagerly adjusting it so he could unroll the first panel. But before he could even focus on the first characters, Aitan spoke in a resonant voice. “My brothers, our new friend Yeshueh ben Yousef has made excellent progress in learning to read. He would like to share his progress with you before we take our midday meal.”

Aitan proffered him a *yad* from the jar on the shelf, and Shueh pointed it at the first character on the panel. He knew perfectly well what the words would be, but he vowed to read the words, and not just recite them from memory.

“*Hazon...Yeshayahu ben Amotz*” he read, carefully sounding out

each letter. “*asher haza...al...Yehuda...Yerushalayim.*” He looked up to gauge his audience.

A few leaned forward with expectant looks on their faces, but more sat back with crossed arms and skeptical looks. One of them, slightly younger than the rest, shook his head. “That’s not much of a test,” he muttered. “Most of us can quote the beginning of Isaiah from memory.” He then stood up, crossed the room, and adjusted the scroll, rolling it several panels deeper into the book. With his own *yad* he pointed in the middle of the displayed panel and said “Read starting right here.”

Shueh placed his own *yad* on the spot designated and began to trace it from right to left.

“*ha'am...haholchim...bechoshech...rau...or...gadol.*” He looked into the man’s eyes. He was tempted to continue the passage ‘and they that dwelt in the valley of shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined,’ but he thought it unwise, for that would only be showing off his memory, not Aitan’s success in tutoring.

“You say you have never known your letters?” the younger man asked incredulously.

“No,” he confirmed. “Not until Aitan explained the symbols to me had I known the difference between a *tav* and a *mem*, or even what any of their names were. Is he not a wonderful teacher?”

Several of the seated men patted their hands together quietly in reverent applause, but the younger man said “Indeed, he has taught you well, but I believe that most of the credit should...”

The rest of his phrase was cut off as all the men turned to see Menachem striding through the door. “What’s this noise coming from the study,” he asked indignantly. But when he saw Shueh sitting in Aitan’s place, he was even more surprised. “*Chaver*,” he asked, “Are you not supposed to be learning your letters from Brother Aitan?”

Aitan blushed, but said nothing to defend himself. Instead it was the younger man who explained. “It appears our friend has learned to read in the space of a single morning. Here, watch this.” He then motioned for Shueh to stand and look over the shoulder of the man seated next to him. He pointed his *yad* to a random space on the page. Without words, Shueh knew that he was being invited to perform, and dutifully sounded out the line.

Menachem's brow furrowed, and he crossed the room to observe the words being pointed out. When Shueh finished, another fat old man raised his hand and volunteered his scroll. Shueh passed to him, followed by Menachem, and again read the line slowly. Finally, the brother sitting by the door stood to allow Shueh to sit in his place. Shueh took a seat and scanned the scroll for a moment, then picked a spot and read "*ani yehova, vehotzeti etchem mitachat sivlot mitzraim*," barely pausing this time. He was already tired of the show and knew this passage about bringing the *bnei Yisrael* out from under the burdens of the Egyptians by heart.

Shueh looked up at Menachem expectantly, but he only stroked the hair of his beard under his lower lip. Under his breath Shueh could hear him murmuring "*waya'al kayonek lefanav, vechashresh me'ereetz tzya*." This was a passage from Yeshayahu, comparing *Mashiach* to a root out of dry ground, and Shueh understood the reason Menachem was reciting it. Was this proof of Shueh's claim to him? It was a weighty matter to consider, so Shueh decided he should drive the message home, but do so in a self-deprecating manner.

"Certainly no form or comeliness here," he admitted, gesturing blankly at himself. "Although my Miri claims otherwise."

Menachem considered him with new eyes. Then he let out a single grunt of laughter, turned back to the expectant men in the room, and said "Brethren, we have witnessed something of a miracle today. I shall consider its meaning for us. But in the meantime, it is not yet time for our meal. Please return to your studies." He nodded appreciatively at Aitan as he gestured towards his spot in the room.

Shueh could tell he was crestfallen for not being invited out of the room for further discussion, so he stood and grasped the old man about the shoulders, pressing hard. "Many thanks, my master," he whispered. "What will you do next? Touch the rocks with your *yad* and call forth the waters?" Aitan gave him a gracious smile of thanks.

23 Iyyar - And patience is better than pride

Ecclesiastes 7:8

Savrana had her muzzle so deep in the trough that her nostrils were bubbling. She was obviously taking her time and drinking as deeply as she could, knowing that she would not get to drink until this same time tomorrow. But Shel knew that once the donkey had drunk her fill, she would patiently and resolutely face the challenge of hauling water on her back over the rough track back to Secacah. This was the fourth day he had performed this task, but it was the first day that Kemal let him go by himself. During the first day he had been anxious about immediately leaving the compound after having been separated from Shueh, but after they had shared a bowl of stew under the stars and had shared what each had done during the day, Shel was confident that Shueh was in good hands and did not need further looking after. Shel thought their accommodations were a bit odd. Here was a warren of rooms and closets inside the compound walls, but there was no lodging place to be found for visitors; they simply had to camp out in the wide open space on the plateau south of the walls. To be sure, the compound blocked all access to the plateau, so there was no danger of wild animals or highwaymen, but it seemed odd. As they had stretched out their blankets they had found the ground smooth. Shueh had then told him of the annual encampment here of hundreds of men who came from all over the land for a “renewal of the covenant” ceremony, something the community practiced here at their own temple in the wilderness instead of going up to Yerushalayim for Shavuot. For several nights they participated in rituals and then ate communal meals and camped out on these same grounds.

And *Shavuot* was two weeks away. The men would be coming soon, so the water supply needed to be topped off. Water flowed into the system of channels and cisterns only once or twice a year, and because of ritual bathing, much of the water was unfit for drinking. The round cistern in the courtyard where he had met Kemal was exclusively for drinking, and it was this cistern that Shel was helping refill with his twice daily journeys to Ein Feshkha.

The journey was not hard. It was an hour's walk one way, with an additional half hour to allow Savrana to quench her thirst and to fill the skins with spring water. It took another hour to coax Savrana back home and a half hour to pour the water into the cistern. Rising early and not dawdling, Shel could finish his task by the midday meal, when the sun's rays became just too hot for man and beast. The only problem was that it didn't appear as if anything was being accomplished. Yesterday Shel had observed a mark on the side of the cistern just level with the water's surface. After he had finished his work, the water was only half a finger past the mark. But since no one seemed to be worried about not having enough water for the expected crowd, Shel did not worry. The walks were quiet, the beast was tame and patient, and if he got thirsty, he could always dip into his supply.

When Savrana had finished drinking, Shel and Abdu, one of the boys who lived at Ein Feshkha, worked together to fill the skins strapped to Savrana's back. While he held the mouth of the skin open for Abdu to pour, he looked back up the road from the spring to the stone buildings of the settlement where he saw a woman in a billowing saffron tunic having words with the proprietor of the beach resort. The expanse and color of her clothing marked her out as one of the very rich here on holiday from the city. He wondered if she had been in the elaborate litter he had passed on his second trip back to Secacah yesterday. The train of beasts and servants following the litter had been substantial. And although she might not be accompanied by serving girls that most wealthy women kept at their elbow, her clothing was to be admired. The old Shar briefly surfaced in the back of his mind, wondering what jewelry might adorn her neck or wrists, but he quickly shook his head and turned back to his task. A moment later, however, a woman's voice called out in his direction.

"*Tav*," he heard her say as she billowed down the path, "are you the man who came over from Secacah?" It was hard to tell from the way her clothing flapped in the breeze, but Shel guessed that besides being a tall woman, she was also large. Physical size and costly dress made for a doubly daunting

encounter. Had the water skins been full, he might have tried to slip away, but he sucked in a deep breath to face this obstacle.

“*Salaam*,” he intoned as he bowed his head deeply, giving the obeisance due to a rich woman, but not answering her question. He needed to find out more about her before he divulged any information.

“The innkeeper over there says that you are the man who comes from Secacah each day to fetch them water,” she said breathlessly as she stopped a healthy distance from Savrana. “Is that right?”

“Yes, mistress,” he said, bowing low and using the most humble words he could find. “I am the water carrier. Do you desire a drink?” He plunged his own cup into the water skin and held it out to the woman, dripping.

“Oh heavens no,” she waved her hands at him, which set off the jangle of many small bracelets. “The wine they bring down from Yericho is barely drinkable, much less this water. Oh no.”

Why did this woman approach him? Why did she not send the innkeeper to talk with him? Something was not right, and he needed either to end the conversation or say very little. “Savrana and I carry the water, and they are expecting us.” He turned to see Abdu with bowed head sunk between his shoulders, not daring to utter a word or make a movement in the woman’s presence. “If you will excuse me, I must finish filling the skins.”

The woman did not reply immediately, but put a finger to her mouth and stroked her lips for a moment. “You are not the water carrier,” she said softly. “Your beast carries the water, you are simply her guide.” She stepped toward Savrana and stroked her neck. “You poor, patient beast,” she cooed, emphasising the animal’s name as being synonymous with her demeanor. Bending her face to Savrana’s eyes. “You do all the work and this man takes the credit.”

Why was this woman playing word games with him? Had she sensed that he was not the stereotypical dim-witted servant, but a man of wit? Was she attempting to match his wit to gain his confidence? Is that also why she was stepping beyond the norms of her own sociality and touching a dirty draft animal?

“If you want knowledge about the people of Secacah or their ways,” he said, trying to preempt her next question, “I am newly come there and know very little.”

Shel saw her eyes suddenly focus intensely on him. “Just how newly come are you?” she asked slowly.

Shel drew back physically. He felt as if he were being cornered by a tigress. He must be very careful with his response. He could not in any way show disrespect, nor could he prevaricate in the slightest. But he was also not going to risk giving away any information about Shueh to this unknown woman. He thought back on the length of the train of servants and beasts that had brought her here. Such wealth and ostentation could only come from Yerushalayim. Had not Andreas said that messengers from the *kohen gadol* had been to Beth-Abara in search of Shueh? It was not beyond their power to have set spies in place to note their arrival at the desert stronghold. He had felt at ease about leaving Shueh in the care of the Brethren. But now, with the wife of an agent of the *kohen gadol*, perhaps even of the Sanhedrin, accosting him in the middle of the desert, he began to panic internally whether he should have left him at all.

“I have been there long enough. I know a mistress is not welcome there,” he said carefully, showing that he too had the ability to discern a thing or two about her. “Nor the Sanhedrin.”

The woman did not retreat a bit. “Even that cowering boy over there could have guessed who I was,” the woman said with just a bit of menace in her voice. “I am called Shoshannah. I am the wife of Shimon ben Gamaliel. You, being a Philadelphian outlander, probably do not know that that means I am daughter-in-law to the President of the Sanhedrin.”

This woman already knew not only that he was a foreigner, but was from Ammon. And even though Shel knew that her knowledge most probably came from an acute sense of observation, he knew he was bested. He lowered his eyes and responded with as much humility as he could muster, “I beg your forgiveness *HaG’virah*.” He used the high language term instead of the colloquial to impart deeper respect.

But before he could say anything else, Shannah laughed aloud and said “I forgive you Shelyeshu’a who arrived at

Secacah just two days ago. Your master Yeshueh should be proud of having such a wise and courageous body-man.”

For a long moment as he gazed open-mouthed at Shannah, Shel felt as if he were falling backward into a deep chasm with the vision of the woman ever receding, and yet growing larger than life. How could she possibly know his name? The name of his master? When he had arrived? This powerful wife of a powerful man. How deep in danger was he? Had agents of the Sanhedrin already taken Shueh from Secacah? He needed to run. He would leave the water and the donkey and sprint as fast as he could to his master’s rescue. But he could not will his feet to move. His knees felt as though they would buckle beneath him.

But then he felt a powerful grasp on his shoulder. “*Shalom*,” the woman whispered gently in his ear. “I mean you no harm. I am seeking to help you and your master.”

Somehow Shel felt the fear instantly evaporate as a warm spark kindled in his heart. Without knowing why, he felt he could trust this woman. But he still could not wrangle any words into his mouth.

“I know of you from Miri and Andreas,” Shannah said in her normal voice. “She revealed her situation to me in confidence when we met in Yericho on the very day you entered Secacah. She spoke so fondly of your master that I decided, no matter what my meddling husband thinks he is supposed to do, I was going to find out more about him and see if I could help him. I would like to meet him.”

Seeing that Shel had no words in response, she continued “I saw to it that Miri’s needs are taken care of for as long as your master is away from her.”

Finally Shel found his words. “We did not know she was in need.”

“Just some problems with money-changers that left her temporarily short of coin,” she assured him.

“My master will be happy to hear it,” Shel thanked her. “But I know not how you two can meet until he has left the brethren.”

“You haven’t had time to think, then, have you?” she teased him. “Certainly your quick thinking mind will soon have a solution.”

Shel knew that she already had a plan, but was giving him the comfort of saving face in front of Abdu, not to mention in his own pride. Instantly his brain began working out the problem. "My master cannot be seen with a woman, especially the wife of an enemy. And you, being wife of a great man, also cannot be seen with my master. It must be secret. It must be at night," he concluded. "It is not hard for us to leave our camp without being seen. There is a big cave just above the road a quarter-hour's journey from here. We can wait there for you. Can you leave your husband at night?"

"Very thoughtful and resourceful," she replied. "And yes, it is not difficult to part from my husband at night. He stuffs his ears with vine wool at night because he says I snore too loudly. Heavens, if he could only hear himself!" she giggled conspiratorially. "I will have to get past the servants, however. That will take a bit of sensitivity on my part, as well as some coin, but never fear, I can handle such a thing. When shall we arrange to meet?"

"Tomorrow night is *Shabbat*," Shel said, thinking aloud. "The journey is further than a *Shabbat* limit. You are not in haste, yes?"

"Not in great haste, no," she replied. "But it should not be put off overlong.

"I think on the third night from now," he said emphatically. "The moon will not rise until just before sunrise, so the night will be darkest black. We will meet three hours after the sun sets."

"I will be there," she said. Then turning to Abdu, who had still not moved or uttered a sound, but was beginning to look about, she put a hand into her breast and pulled out a copper coin. "But you, my boy, shall not say a word of this to anyone." Moving to him to put the coin in his trembling hand she said softly, "and another one just like it will be given you when, after our meeting, I am not discovered to anyone on your account."

The boy vigorously nodded his head, his wide eyes staring at the coin. She gave a curt nod to Shel, and then turned about and flowed back down the path toward the tents that huddled further out toward the beach, raising a hand over her shoulder in parting.

Shel looked at Abdu. Abdu looked back up at him. Still saying nothing, he purposefully raised his hand to his lips and pinched them between thumb and forefinger. Shel smiled and tousled his forelocks, and they both set back to the task of filling Savrana's water skins.

Chapter 6

Author's Notes

At the beginning of this book, you will find the map of Secacah. Secacah is the name I have given to what is now called Qumran, where the Dead Sea scrolls were found in 1947. Indeed, the map of Secacah is my own rendering of the archaeological plan published by R. De Vaux in 1973. While it is most commonly thought that Qumran was the headquarters of the Essene sect of Jewry where manuscripts were lovingly curated, copied, and hidden, there are other equally valid opinions of what purpose was served by this walled settlement.

One of those opinions matches the presence of two kilns, stacks of dishes, and the community's proximity to rich deposits of marl, the raw material for clay, wondering whether this was a ceramics factory.

Another opinion is that Qumran was a fortress. The central two-story structure's foundation consists of a thick stone foundation about the same height as the surrounding walls from which upper story walls rise, unlike the rest of the buildings that rise directly from stone footings in the earth. Because of this fortress-like base, some archaeologists have concluded that this was a watchtower.

An abundance of silver and copper coins as well as fancy glassware have led others to believe this was some sort of commercial center.

However, the number of step-down *mikvehs* clearly visible at the site do little to support these other opinions. Why would a ceramics factory, a fortress, or a commercial center have so many ritual purity baths?

It is documented in several documents found at Qumran that there were large gatherings of the Sons of Light each year during the festival of *Shavuot*, or what is called Pentecost in the Acts of the Apostles. The year-round population of Qumran was certainly less than 100 souls, but a great influx of pilgrims for a few days of feasting would require a stockpile of plates. Also, the fact that Sons of Light who became part of the year-round

population left their families behind. Would there not have been a communal order of sorts that would provide annual stipends for the families who had been left behind, thus accounting for the large number of coins discovered on the site?

I believe there is enough evidence in the archaeological and historical record to confirm that those who lived at Qumran were a religious group who had separated themselves from the Sadducee-operated temple in Jerusalem. They conducted a large enterprise that both supported separated families and could provide provender for many visitors during a festival each year. And since they thought the temple in Jerusalem polluted, might they not have built their own *Heichal* in which to perform the rites they felt were uncorrupted? This is certainly not established by any one archaeologist. But in this historical fiction setting, I believe it is not unplausible to create the holy sanctuary I have described below.

24 Iyyar - Let Us Go unto the House of the LORD.

Psalm 122:1

The Sabbath sun had just finished rising over the eastern mountains when Menachem came through the doorway from the great dining hall to the bare dirt of the open table land that Shueh and Shel camped upon. They had plenty of straw tucked into a linen sack to lay their blankets on, a gift from Kemal. Menachem motioned to Shueh to follow him through a door and back to the courtyard where they had met. When they arrived, he removed his sandals and robe, stripping down only to a modest undergarment that covered him from shoulders to knees. He invited Shueh to do the same, although Shueh wore only a loincloth beneath his outer clothing. Without embarrassment, however, he followed Menachem down the steps of the large *mikveh*, keeping to those on the left while Menachem used those at the right. They descended three steps this time, with the water coming up to mid thigh level. The same ablutions were performed as on his first day, only much more water was used. As the washing was performed, Shueh heard Menachem chanting snippets of prayers from *Torah*, and he did his best to follow. Upon finishing, the two ascended back out of the pool, dried themselves on towels hung on a peg next to the dining hall, and donned their clothing and shoes once more. They then retraced their steps back toward the study hall, but then turned aside as Menachem invited him to follow as he climbed up a narrow and steep stairway that led to the second story of the building that loomed over the entire compound. When they reached the door, Menachem turned to him and said "You have been washed clean of the sins of this generation. Having been so purified, you may begin to enter into the *heichal* of the Sons of Tzaduk," referring to the building as a temple.

There was no *mezuzah* mounted on the doorpost to touch. Menachem pushed the wooden door, and it parted in the middle to reveal a darkened room lit only by the light of a single oil lamp mounted in a beautiful sconce. There was no furniture, only stone walls and another passage that was covered by a veil of some sort. Menachem did not push through the veil. He closed the door behind him, squatted to the ground and sat down,

crossing his legs and leaning back against the wall. Shueh followed his example against the facing wall.

"Here within the sacred walls of this *heichal* we may more freely discuss sacred things," he began. "My brethren and forefathers have long awaited the day of the coming of *Mashiach*. We pray for it constantly, and although we fully expect him to come, we do not expect him to come *today*. Today we have chores to do and lessons to learn. Maybe he will come tomorrow when I have become a bit better."

"But if he has indeed come today," Shueh offered helpfully, "What should one do?"

"Yes," said Menachem. "The time is ripe for the coming of *Mashiach*. And while you are not necessarily what we were expecting, everything about you gives one pause to consider your claim."

"And what is it you are looking for," Shueh asked sincerely. "What is *Mashiach* supposed to do? What is he supposed to be like?"

"It depends on who you ask," Menachem replied. "Those who defile the *heichal* in Yerushalayim say that he must be a literal descendant of Dawid, who keeps *Torah* perfectly. He must lead *bnei Yisrael* home from their wide dispersion, restore the temple, and eject any and all foreign rulers."

"That is a tall order for any individual," Shueh admitted. "But you say that is what the *Tzadukim* expect. Do you expect something different?"

"First of all, we do not require that it be a single person, for what he must accomplish is both priestly and kingly. Even Dawid, who wanted to build the first temple, was denied the privilege by Adonai because he was a king, a man of war. Since there must be both spiritual sanctification and political purging, it may be that *Mashiach* be two different persons entirely. There are even those who believe, as with all things of God, that there must be a third as well. That prophet, like unto Moshe, who will be our new lawgiver, bringing us a new, higher order of conduct. But whatever happens, we believe those who darken *heichal* at this moment, those sons of darkness, must be removed, and this we must be prepared to do even by the shedding of blood"

"It would please me much if someone else were in charge of that," Shueh admitted. "I'm not much of a soldier."

"This is not all," Menachem interjected. "In addition to the stipulations of the sons of darkness, we also believe *Mashiach* will perform miraculous acts. Learning to read in a single morning is truly miraculous, but that was centered on yourself and your own improvement. *Mashiach* will center his work on the poor people of the land. He will declare the pleasing word of Adonai to them, heal them of their physical and spiritual maladies, and some say even raise the dead."

Menachem looked intently at Shueh. "Are you ready to do these things?"

Shueh's gaze dropped as he turned his hands upward in front of him. He ran his thumbs over his fingertips, lost in thought. "My manservant, as you call him, Shelyeshu'a. He was dead once."

"Andreas mentioned this," Menachem said. "I have been anxious to hear the story."

Shueh related the circumstances that led to Ezra's killing Shar in the night. He then tried again to put into words the grief that he felt that another man had died on account of his own hesitancy. "I knew he was dead," he explained. "His head was bashed in as deeply and as surely as if a lion had attacked him. His blood and brains were spread over his clothes and the ground. His eyes were open and staring into nothingness. But something inside of me," he stammered, but then corrected himself, "something outside of me, but I sensed it in my mind, not my ears. Something willed me, almost overpowered me to stretch my hands out and pronounce words of blessing over the dead man. Not to send his spirit home in peace, but to call it back. I told the dead man to rise."

"And did he?" Menachem asked eagerly.

"No, he didn't," Shueh shook his head. "So I got up and left. And because I didn't wait for the Adonai's hand to work, I missed the miracle that would have helped convince me of my own power and calling."

"This seems an odd thing," Menachem scowled. "You did not see him rise?"

“Yes, but as with all things divine, it turns out that was the way it should have been,” Shueh explained. “I did not have the proof positive that I had powers over life and death when I finally agreed to go forward with accepting Yoni’s baptism, to deliberately choose to follow Adonai no matter what was placed in front of me. And it wasn’t even a single hour after I made that resolve that the dead man appeared whole before me.”

“This is remarkable,” Menachem said. “And I have also heard the story from Shelyeshu’a. He is adamant he was passing into the next world when he heard your voice calling him back, and hence is so devoted to you that he changed his name. I have no doubt, fortified with the confidence such an experience instills, you will be able to touch the sick and afflicted and raise them from their beds as well.”

“And yet you are still hesitant about accepting my claim,” Shueh said. “Because I have said I am the Son of God, you think I am claiming something that should not be, and so I cannot be *Mashiach*?”

“Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his arm, whose heart turns away from the Lord,” Menachem practically shouted through gritted teeth. “How is it that Adonai, who is transcendent above all nature; who is One and indivisible; how can a fleshly son be begotten of him?” A sneer crept over his entire face. “How can you, a man with so much power and authority, be so vile and repugnant as to claim that the Holy God of Israel mated with your filthy mother like so many barnyard animals? Either you are God’s anointed and you give up this filthy and wretched claim, or I will see to it that you are destroyed like every other messianic pretender.”

A silence filled the small chamber, one that raised ever and ever more deadening as the background buzzing of Shueh’s ears gained in intensity. Was Menachem so foolish that he did not know how many times this exact argument had fevered his brain over the years? Or perhaps he did know, and was kicking sand in Shueh’s eyes for the sheer spite of it. Either way, the man was acting taunting him and deliberately angering him. As the anger boiled within him, seeking desperately for an avenue of escape, Shueh envisioned his hand throttling the old man with clenched hands. But no sooner had the vision bubbled up inside, he found

himself wincing at the very idea. No! Even if Menachem's intent was purely malicious, physical harm would not balance out any scales. But the pressure still seethed in his soul. Desperate to relieve the mounting distress, he called out in silent prayer: "O God, help me!"

Immediately he was again on the seashore on a moonlit night with fragrant breezes blowing through his hair. But it was not Timo who sat across from him. It was Menachem. But it was also not the Menachem who sat scowling on the floor across from him. It was an ageless Menachem, whose real name was something that Shueh couldn't quite put into words. Shueh remembered him perfectly. He was one of great courage and intelligence who had defended Shueh in a battle of words. When was this? The faintest tinge of memory tried to assemble itself in his mind, but was hopelessly wrecked whenever he tried to put order or labels on the forms that drifted in and out of focus. But nevermind, he thought. Menachem was not acting out of malice. He was and always had been a good and faithful friend. He was just confused. He had been misled and just needed a gentle boost to get back onto the right path.

As Shueh's mind came to this peaceful conclusion, he realized his eyes had been shut; slammed tightly shut in his previous anger and rage. But as he opened them and relaxed his face in the warm benevolence that now filled him, he saw the scowl still tracing its harsh path in Menachem's aged face. How long had Shueh been lost in reverie? It must all have happened in an instant, because Menachem was still drawing breath for the next onslaught of invective.

He put his hand forward and rested his fingers lightly on Menachem's knee. "*Shalom*, my master and friend," he whispered. "I know you are a man whose only desire is to be zealous in the defense of the pure faith. You have been that way longer than you know. But it seems that one or two tiny errors may have been put into what you were taught. May we discuss them as friends and see if they are indeed true?"

Menachem, who had been poised for a verbal contest, was totally disarmed by Shueh's calm words. The scowl slowly faded from his face, leaving only vague doubt in its place. "Yes," he agreed. "We can speak as friends."

“Let us begin by examining what the scriptures say about the nature of God,” Shueh said. “How is it that despite Moshe seeing God's very backside that we have come to think that God has no such part; that he has no parts at all?”

Menachem had to gather his thoughts for a moment, but then he began his well-reasoned outline. “First, that which makes our faith different from every other theology on earth: God has expressly prohibited likenesses of him to be made. Second, God's very name. Third, that God is the very definition of Oneness. Fourth, that his ways are so far beyond our ways that we cannot even comprehend them. And finally, the fact that he is everywhere, meaning he cannot possibly be in one place only.”

“Well then,” Shueh admitted with an impressed frown. “It sounds like you have been thinking of this for a while. At least, if we remain with these five arguments, we stand the chance of coming to a conclusion. I'm hoping you don't plan on introducing new things as we go along?”

Menachem shook his head. “No, those points are more than are needed.”

Shueh sat back and folded his hands in his lap. “Tell me about how *Thou shalt not make any graven image* supports your premise.”

“It is not my premise,” Menachem objected. “It is the truth.” When Shueh did not say anything in response, Menachem continued. “Every temple on earth except ours has an image in it. It may be a crude stone barely worked into the recognizable form of a man, or it may be the elegant gold and ivory statues found in the *Goy* temples. But whether they are wholesale manufacturing of the image, or just chipping away at a stone, they are made by the hand of man. How can anything manmade become in any way divine?”

“You know that they don't claim that the image itself is divine,” Shueh corrected. “It is simply a device made by men to help normal people to focus their thoughts on something greater than themselves.”

“That may be,” Menachem allowed, “But when they concentrate, what are they imagining? I'll tell you. They see an elegant and beautiful white woman dressed all in gold with gemstones crowning her head. But gold and gemstones are dug

up out of the ground. And a woman? That needs no explanation here. What they are imagining is simply an oversized version of something earthly. Yeshayahu quotes Adonai saying ‘The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; where is the house that ye may build unto me? And where is the place that may be my resting-place?’ We shuffle about on a footstool and dare to make its dust a representation of the divine? No! We are prohibited from carving an image because it is impossible to represent what he is.”

Shueh wanted desperately to remark that if there is a footstool, there must be a foot, or to quote the next passage that said ‘For all these things hath my hand made,’ but he refrained, allowing Menachem to make his point.

“Thank you,” Shueh said. “If I understand you correctly, the reason God commanded us to refrain from carving images was because it is a futile and misguided effort to represent what cannot be represented. Is that a fair summary of your point?”

“Yes, that is fair,” Menachem agreed.

“Your next point has to do with God saying *I am who I am* to Moshe from the burning bush,” Shueh moved on. “How does this support an immaterial God?”

“Isn’t it obvious to you,” Menachem answered with exasperation. “He is. He does not change. He is not something in relation to something else. A stone was once part of the rock. The rock is a part of the mountain. And the mountain is a part of the land, which God commanded to be. There is a chain of events from Adonai to every other thing that exists. But he alone is the one who has caused all existence. He spoke and it was done and it was good. Was there anything that ever acted upon Adonai to make him or cause him to do something? If Adonai had hands and feet, something else would have to have fashioned them out of material that Adonai did not create.”

“I see,” Shueh said, again constraining himself from answering. “Because God is, he is the cause of everything, and nothing can cause him or any part of him. And since his parts would have to have been created, such parts cannot exist. Do I understand you correctly?”

“Yes,” Menachem nodded. “To the *Goy* he is simply the unmoved mover.”

“An interesting way to put it,” Shueh allowed, but since he was already familiar with this, he moved on immediately. “Your third argument is from our own most beloved and hallowed prayer: *Hear, O Israel: Adonai our God, Adonai is one.*”

“Yes, Yeshueh,” Menachem vigorously agreed. “One! Not many. And we’re not just talking about the fact that the *Romim* have gods for war and peace and doors and floors and heaven and birds and whatever.” Menachem gesticulated with each object as his voice got more intense. “Adonai is not just saying that when we count gods we don’t get past the number one. He means so much more. How many fingers do you have? How many toes? How many ribs and how many organs behind those ribs? And what about your fingernails? Are they one with you? What happened to the parts you pared off last week, or last year, or when you were a child? You’re indeed one person, but you are in no way one, even with your own parts.”

Shueh sensed this was one of Menachem’s favorite topics and he could probably talk about it for hours. “The oneness of God is so singular that to talk of his nose dilutes the very concept. To claim that he has knees to bend distorts his uniqueness. That he might have hundreds of hairs in his beard dissolves the unity of his being.”

“I don’t think I could have said it better myself,” Menachem agreed. “And I am quite an expert on that topic, if I may be so bold.”

“You may be,” Shueh answered, “because you have spent the effort to achieve that expertise. But let’s also hear your expertise on your fourth point: *For My thoughts are not your thoughts.*”

“I must remark before going on,” Menachem added “that your recall of holy scripture itself is singular. I listed five points of contention, and you have been able to quote the exact words I would have used to back them up. It is indeed Yeshayahu once more who expresses the immaterial nature of Adonai.”

“You can see why Yeshayahu is my favorite among the prophets then?” Shueh asked.

“Granted,” Menachem affirmed. “But sometimes he is very hard to understand. However, this quotation is not among the hard ones. It is simple. We can think and posit and conjecture all

day long. We can moan and cry and grumble all through the night. But nothing that we ever think will ever approach the thoughts of Adonai. Our thoughts stem from our hunger and thirst, from our pain and pleasure, from our wants and needs. Does Adonai hunger or thirst? Does he want anything or need anything? His thoughts transcend even our highest aspirations.” Menachem’s mood began to swing back from his earlier conciliatory tone to scowling displeasure. “If he had a toe, could he not stub it on a corner of the temple? If he had a nose, could he not be bothered by the stench of offal burning on the altar? How can you imagine that Adonai could possess such parts, much less the member of earthly pleasures from which your seed supposedly sprang?” Having debased himself so thoroughly with such words, he began to spit to cleanse his mouth of the foulness. But remembering where he was, he raised the hem of his tunic and rubbed his tongue on it instead.

“The Lord God cannot even conceive of the musty thoughts that course through our heads,” Shueh summarized, “so he cannot be like us at all. We, being constrained to one place and time in our frail bodies, cannot possibly conceive of his almighty state of being.”

“And in that statement lie the seeds of the final argument: *El Shaddai*,” Menachem concluded. “He who is sufficient, the source of our nutrition, who is the mountain that can destroy and overpower. With *El Shaddai*’s power, Moshe parted the seas. Dawid sings of *El Shaddai* being enthroned over those floods. And Yeshayahu says he sits above the circle of the earth upon which we are mere grasshoppers. What body can sit in the heavens, above earth’s circle? What hand can part the waters? No, my miraculous young man, this is not a being with members and fleshly thoughts. This is a supreme being who is above all earthly forms and material.”

Menachem’s hands were raised, as if in prayer. But from beneath his upraised arms, sharp eyes glinted in the semi darkness of the lamplight. Shueh witnessed a new thought come to Menachem as his head cocked slightly to one side. “Your friend Yochanan of Beth-Abara, he told me of a prophecy in his life that he would prepare *Mashiach*’s way. He said he lately learned that this consisted of helping you find your way into

wearing *Mashiach's* mantle, as it were. Perhaps that is my mission as well. To weed out the few tares that remain in your understanding of Adonai, thereby also preparing *Mashiach's* way."

Having come to this point, with Menachem's arguments having been fully developed and understood, Shueh saw this new suggestion as having gone beyond the mark. It was time to reign in the conversation and turn it on a new course. "Yochanan's mission was given to him by a messenger of God," Shueh reminded him. "Have you received any such messengers?" Menachem began opening his mouth, but Shueh stopped him, intuiting what he was going to say. It was an odd feeling, having the certainty of what a man was going to say, but he felt extremely confident. "The scriptures are not that kind of messenger, my friend. They say the same thing to everyone, and everyone hears them differently. Surely they are God's word, and he speaks to you each day when you read them. But a messenger brings a distinct message from God to you alone. Yoni's messenger was of that type."

Menachem was abashed, hearing his idea struck down before he could even say it. Shueh, however, feeling his discomfort, quickly ameliorated the blow. "No doubt God has set you up to find my way properly in the role he has appointed for me, so let us examine what you have said to see if your thoughts should alter my thinking." Menachem's face registered a faint ray of returning hope. "Let me put a question to you," Shueh suggested. "Did Moshe feel that the God he encountered, either in the bush and atop the mountain, was immaterial and incomprehensible?"

"I have never heard the question asked like that before," Menachem acknowledged. "I'm not sure exactly what you mean."

"Meaning, let us leave out what anyone else has said about the nature of God," Shueh drew a line from floor to ceiling with his hand. Gesturing to his left he said "For more than a thousand years men have been interpreting what was written long before them." Gesturing back to his right he said "I want to examine only what was written by Moshe, without bringing any later tradition to bear on it. Do you think you can do that?"

"Of course, I can," Menachem waved Shueh off.

“It is the hardest thing you’ll ever have done in your life,” Shueh cautioned.

“Pfft, how hard can it be,” Menachem denied.

“Because to do so you’re going to have to have real intent,” Shueh explained. “What that means is that you’re going to have to open your mind to allow the distinct possibility that what you have thought your whole life may not be perfectly correct, and the fortitude to accept whatever truth comes in that moment, and act accordingly in future. You are going to have to be prepared to accept the fact that you are holding a conversation with God’s son, the fruit of his very loins.” Shueh saw Menachem visibly wince at this. “That is horribly disturbing to you now, so you are going to have to steel yourself to be ready to accept that. Is that something you think you can do?”

“Now that you put it in those words, I am more unsure,” Menachem said quietly.

“Now that, my master, is honesty,” Shueh congratulated him. “Had you said anything else, I would not have believed you. Let me begin the discussion by saying this. In an experience right in the middle of Yarden, right where the Ark of the Covenant passed over, exactly where Eliyahu’s cloak clove the waters, at that exact same, holy spot, I had an undeniable experience. Much like Moshe on the mount or Eliyahu on the hill, my eyes were opened wide in midday, and I saw God our Father. What’s more, he told me I was his son.” Shueh’s voice was barely audible, causing Menachem to lean in as far as he could. “I have never said these words as clearly to anyone anywhere else before. But here in your holy sanctuary, if even only at its door, I feel appropriate to say these words to you at this time.” And now, speaking a little more loudly, Shueh asked “Do those words feel repugnant or dark to you in any way?”

Menachem’s eyes lost focus and slowly wandered up toward the ceiling. “I must admit,” he answered, “whether it is the presence of the spirit of Adonai or just the spell of your voice, I do not feel any darkness, even though I do not necessarily agree with what you say.”

“That is good enough for a starting point,” Shueh assured him. “Just remember that feeling. If you ever start feeling something less or different, then we have probably gone astray.”

Shueh then sat up and leaned his back against the cool wall, looking up for a moment to regard the beauty of the oil lamp flickering in the sconce. "Before we get to Moshe, I need to do a little experiment. I will say a few words, and you tell me what they mean." Shueh saw Menachem nod, and so said "*I am here now.*"

"Yes, you are," Menachem agreed.

"No, those are the words I want you to tell me what they mean," corrected Shueh.

"You are here now?" Menachem asked confused. "What else can they mean? Now, at this moment, you, Yeshueh ben Yousef, are here in the initial chamber of the *heichal* of the Sons of Tzaduk in Secacah. Is that what you were asking?"

"That is one meaning of the phrase," Shueh said tantalizingly. "There are others as well. Suppose I said it a little breathlessly and emphasised it like this: I am *here* now. Would that mean something different?"

"You mean, as if you had finally arrived and were late or something," Menachem guessed.

"It could very well be an excuse for something like that. "But suppose I said it like this," Shueh continued: "I am here *now.*"

"That could mean that although you are present with me now, you are expecting to be somewhere else soon, I suppose," Menachem reasoned. "But I don't understand what you're getting at with this."

"Hear O Israel, the Lord God is One God," Shueh said without any emphasis. "Now I have only recently learned to read, but I can tell you that from what I have already seen, there is no way of emphasising any one word over another in our written script. Can you not see that just like my simple three word phrase can be interpreted in as many ways depending on the context of the spoken word, the written holy words of God can also be interpreted in different ways. Just because you believe that its meaning is blindingly apparent to even the most spiritually blind does not mean that your interpretation is the correct one."

"You're saying that I would have had to have been there when the words were initially spoken," Menachem rehearsed

Shueh's words back to him, showing his understanding. "So you're going to explain what was actually meant by Adonai being One God?"

"Can I?" Shueh answered. He could see that Menachem was startled by this reply. "Was I there? Did I hear the words with my own ear? No, my revered teacher, I am not going to try to instruct you. This is not the order of things. If you are to be taught, it is going to be by the same things that have taught you heretofore: your own valiant defense of what is right and true, and your own determination to find out that truth for yourself."

"I don't understand," Menachem was totally flustered. "You listened to my arguments, and yet you will not refute them?"

"Absolutely not," Shueh laughed out loud. "When was the last time anyone was convinced by arguments and refutations? No, I'm simply going to tell you a story and then recommend that you take your arguments, my claim, and the contents of the story back to your own rooms. There, with the company of your own God whom you have chosen to defend so vigorously, you can decide whether my claim has any likelihood of truth. But remember, it is up to you to open yourself to the possibility and be ready to support it with as much zeal as you have for other things."

"I'm glad that you are here with me now in this place," Menachem smiled. "If you had made such a suggestion to the assembled brethren, or any other group for that matter, they would have called you a coward for not defending your own views. I was anticipating a lively discussion, but for me at least, your method stands the chance of success."

"It is best to tailor your teaching to the individual," Shueh said. "Now, my story. About six years ago my work took me to the home of a rich merchant in Tiberias. He was such an one as had fallen in love with all things *Goy*. You know the type?"

"The very ones the Yehuda the Hammer fought against," Menachem nodded vigorously. "Yes, I know the type."

"I worked many hours crafting a mosaic for his *triclinium*, and thus overheard many of his discussions with his friends. Many of these talks had to do with the writings of Pelaton and Aristotelets. Neither of these *Goy* discussed a pantheon of gods, but spoke of god in the singular, so I found it at least interesting

to listen to. I take it you are at least somewhat familiar with the writings of these men, for earlier you said that to the *Goy*, God was simply the unmoved mover. This concept comes from the writings of Aristotelets if I remember what I heard correctly.”

“I know the names, of course, and some of what they wrote,” Menachem replied, “but I am not familiar with who wrote what.”

“That is fair,” Shueh nodded. “I could not always tell who was being discussed either. I will not bore you with all that I heard. ‘Thought thinking itself’ and ‘What is that which is eternally and has no becoming, or that which comes to be but is never?’ As I listened to their discussions, I came up with my own summary: ‘God is being God.’ It seemed that both the authors of the writings and the discussions my employer and his friend were all trying to outdo each other in being the one who could best describe the superlatives of something that could not be described to begin with. Anyway, when I had completed the job and had collected my pay, I thought it not improper to ask the man and his friend a few questions. I wondered whether they found what they had been discussing compatible with *Torah*. My employer didn’t have much of a response. It was clear he had slept through much of synagogue. But his friend was proud of his knowledge of *Torah*. ‘Yehudi may have been the first to understand the oneness of God,’ he said, ‘But the *Goy* were the first to be able to describe him.’ I tried to make the observation that their description of God had simply been to define him as incomprehensible. ‘That is the beauty of it,’ he claimed. ‘It is and forever will be a mystery we cannot comprehend.’”

Shueh stopped for a moment, rubbing his fingers together, trying to think how best to wrap this all up. Then he pressed his hands together and brought his fingertips to his lips. Finally he spoke. “Moshe speaks of a God with a face, fingers, and buttocks. He does his best to let us know this God is not on our level, but also to make him familiar enough to us. His story of the creation makes us the very image of God, just as Seth was the image of Adam. Our prophets have used terms to elevate Adonai above the capricious and man-like gods of the *Goy* and *Romim*. But no one has ever declared that God is an unknowable mystery. I say to you, it is an abject denunciation of our mortal quest to become more godlike if we put God on a mysterious

shelf of incomprehensibility and deny any knowledge of him. This does not come from our own scripture. This is an invention and corruption of the *Goyim*. It should not be a part of our religion. We should strive to know the truth, to know who God is, for that is what makes our life have purpose. Someday, in the eternal worlds, you and I will come to know God perfectly. But in order to arrive there, we need to start now.”

Menachem knew it was his turn to express comprehension of what Shueh had explained, but he found himself without words for a few moments. “You’re saying we should not try to mystify Adonai, but come to know him, because a godlike life is to know God.”

“You have understood me,” Shueh affirmed. “And it is this God that I want you to contemplate as you think about what we have discussed. You can come to know him, Menachem. He is your father. In an even more special sense, he is my father. And let me say one more thing about that to help put your mind at ease. I do not believe for a moment that, as in *Goy* mythology, God came down from heaven and cavorted with my mother. Since his ways are above our ways, I perceive that by some other means his essence was planted within my mother and grew into me. My mother’s womb did not magically sprout a baby from thin air. As a testament to that, I can tell you my body is different. It heals itself. I can withstand hunger and thirst. That and many other things.

“But my mind did not come already filled with knowledge of the divine. Like everyone else I have had to stay awake in synagogue, to learn my sums, and to believe in a God I cannot see. But now that I have covenanted with God to follow whatever path he has for me, things begin to open up in my mind in a way I had never imagined. But there is one thing I cannot do. I cannot see into the future. That is why I have come here. You can indeed be a messenger of Adonai if you will help me understand what *Mashiach* is supposed to do, and then perhaps help me along the way to get started.”

“I admit that your description of your generation does set my mind at ease somewhat,” Menachem replied. “And, referring to your earlier admonition about the feelings of light and darkness. Nothing you have said has done anything to dim the light or the

feeling in this room. Indeed, I believe that, were it possible, the lamp burns somewhat brighter. Or perhaps it is my eyes seeing more clearly. Whatever the case, whatever reservations I had about you do not seem so insurmountable as before. I believe I will be able to honestly consider your proposal on my own with what you call real intent.”

“I guess our interview in this room is over then,” Shueh said as he made the effort to straighten his stiff muscles. “I am anxious to learn more about the rest of this building. Is now an appropriate time?”

“You are familiar with the idea of God’s own due time?” Menachem asked.

“Unfortunately, yes,” Shueh replied. “It is never when you want it to be.”

“Then you will not be surprised when I tell you that now is not the time to enter further into our *heichal*,” Menachem said. “But have patience. I suspect I will be able to gain the voice of the Brethren to admit you to our rituals by the time of *Shavuot*.”

“Then I will be patient until that time,” Shueh said, bowing his head in deference to his master’s request.

Menachem arose a little more slowly than Shueh had done, and pulled the doors open to reveal a brilliant stream of light. Both men put their forearms up to shield their eyes from the sudden glare. As Menachem’s eyes adjusted to the light, he gazed in the direction of the kiln. “I see that smoke is as yet absent from our kiln. You have not yet made the repairs?”

“I admit I have not,” Shueh said. “I spent some time on the mountain slope yesterday trying to find the right kind of stone to do the job, but I have not yet been able to locate what I am looking for.”

“Well, now that your reading lessons are done, I think you may be able to spend more time in that pursuit,” Menachem said as he began to descend the stairs. “We will be having a multitude of men arrive at *Shavuot*, and they will each need bowls and cups. Our supply is running short, so I hope you will be able to get the job done as soon as possible.” He descended a step or two more, then turned to face Shueh. “Perhaps, if you really have the power you say you have, you could work a little miracle for our kiln?” But before Shueh could react, Menachem burst out in

laughter. “No, I jest. I make light of that which is sacred. I shall have to do penance for that one, I’m afraid.”

25 Iyyar - I Rise Before Dawn and Cry for Help Psalm 119:147

Shannah stood on a clear patch of ground between the cliffs rising to her left and the scrubby vegetation that jumbled its way down to a soggy seep between her and the Salt Sea to her right. She had already turned her right ankle twice, and wanted to pick her path more carefully to avoid any more pain. Although she could make out the forms of stones and depressions in the ground, it was hard to gauge their distance exactly. As far as she could remember, she had never been out in the wild at night by herself. Sure, maybe a few times flitting back home from a friend's house long after sunset, but this? This was a totally new adventure. And although it had caused her much anxiety in the days leading up to this night, now that she was out in it and making headway, she felt a thrill of exhilaration. No, she might stumble when it came to long words and difficult concepts in her head, but she could do this. She sucked in a deep breath of air and puffed her cheeks as she expelled it slowly. How much further to the cave Shel had mentioned. A quarter hour? Does that mean him pacing beside a donkey who is running to water, or a fat woman picking her way in the dead of night? She looked up, still marveling at the spray of stars glowing in a perfectly black and cloudless sky, blotted out only by the nearness of the cliffs at her side. She held her breath for a moment and relished in the absolute silence that surrounded her. The city was never quiet. Even at night there were the low sounds of animals in the stalls, the thump and clank of those who cleaned the streets, and of course, her snoring husband. But this silence, it almost hurt her ears. Ah, she thought, except for the muted footfalls and stifled breaths she thought she could just make out far behind her. She let her gaze drop from the stars and closely examined the cliffs. Up ahead some vague distance she thought she could just make out a couple of blots even darker than the night. Perhaps this was the cave Shel had mentioned? She focused her eyes more sharply on the ground in front of her and began picking her slow way further down the road.

Only two or three minutes later she pulled up short when she heard a whispering voice not ten paces in front of her.

“I believe she is alone,” she heard. Her initial reaction was of sudden panic. But before her mind could imagine anything more, she thought about the voice. It was not the voice of a robber. However, it was not Shelyeshu’a’s voice either. There was only one real option.

“How dare you make an old woman walk all alone in the night without so much as taking her hand,” she scolded. “Your mother would be aghast, Yeshueh.”

Her sharp language resulted in an immediate scurrying of small stones and grunting as two men leaped to their feet and came to her, one at each side. Shel put forth his cocked arm to offer assistance, while Shueh reached out both his hands for her. “At least we did not make you climb up to the caves on the cliff, as Shel wanted us to,” Shueh whispered, “that is something, is it not?” And then taking her hands in his, he remarked, “Nor are you an old woman, *HaG’virah*.”

“Even your flattery lacks care,” Shannah tutted. “What woman wants to be known as ‘not old?’ I suppose next you’ll be trying to tell me I’m not fat, but just have big bones, right?”

Neither Shueh nor Shel dared to say anything in response to this, and looked at each other with wide, rounded eyes that could easily be seen in the starlight.

“Oh, take it easy, boys,” she laughed. “It is nothing. I often jest when I find myself anxious. And believe me, meeting up with two strong men whom I don’t know in the middle of the desert at midnight makes a gal more than a bit anxious.”

The two men breathed audible sighs of relief and muttered such words as were needed to help her find a seat on the rocks they themselves had been perching on for the last hour. “Thanks for warming up the seat for me,” she laughed. “It gets bitter cold out here at night. And since it will get nothing but colder, let’s dispense with any introductory niceties you were planning so I can get back to my bed and not be a frozen body when my husband comes for me in the morning.” With that, she turned her full face toward Shueh and put on her best listening face.

Shueh stumbled in response. “*HaG’virah*, it is you who requested this meeting. I am at a loss as to what I should say.”

“So you have no idea of the danger you’re in or how to avoid it, do you?” she asked him.

“You know of my situation, then?” Shueh answered, not knowing exactly how much she knew about him.

“You and/or those around you are claiming that you are *Mashiach*. You’re holed up in that compound full of holier-than-thou men hoping they can tell you how best to come out before the world as their savior. And you’ve got a little more than a week before you make your decision. And you’re trying to do all this on an empty stomach. I can’t even think about what to put on in the morning until after I’ve had bread and cheese. How you think you can plan to conquer the world without so much as an almond in you, I have no idea.”

In response to this, Shueh pulled a small loaf of bread from his pocket, broke off a large piece, put it in his mouth and swallowed it quickly. “The nice thing about staying up all night is that I can eat more that way,” he smiled. “And I will have another meal of much more than almonds before the sun comes up.”

“Well, maybe you’re not as crazy as I had imagined,” she nodded. “But do you know that no matter what those prophets divine for you in Secacah, you won’t make it past Yericho before the likes of my husband get their hands on you and send you away into the night.”

“I know that they know of me, and are not happy,” he responded. “But no, I did not know that I already carried a price on my head.”

“The reason I’m down here at all,” she explained “is that my husband, the son of the *nasi*, was sent here to be the nice face of the Sanhedrin and tempt you to come under his friendly wing to be introduced to the High Priest.”

“You are the wife of Shimon ben Gamaliel?” Shueh was surprised. “I have met him before. Many years ago when I was a boy. He seemed overly suspicious, but not a bad man. Although his father had to coach him on good manners. I admit, I would have accepted his invitation.”

“And you would have ended up dead,” Shannah said bitterly. “Oh no, not under his hand. He probably does not even know all that Qayaffa has planned, but that cursed wretch would have you carted off in the dead of night before you could say *Shema Yisrael*. He will not do anything to allow his cozy relationship

with the *Romim* prefect to be disturbed. He's held on to power twice as long as anyone else ever has, and he means to die of old age in that chair."

Neither Shel nor Shueh had any response to this, but sat in stunned silence on either side of her.

"Look, I don't know anything about you," she said, looking directly at Shueh. "But I've met your wife. She is the sweetest woman I have ever met, and smart too. If you have convinced that wonderful woman to believe in and support you as she does, then you deserve a chance to convince the rest of the world before the bloody High Priest cuts you down or Pilatus pins you to a cross."

After having been shut up in the confines of a holy sanctum for so many days, the reality of the outside world began to creep in on Shueh's awareness. "I admit, my lady, these are things I had not yet considered. But it is a comfort to me that, while I concentrate on things of a more spiritual nature, Adonai has sent you, his messenger, to provide for my temporal well-being."

It was Shannah's turn to be caught off guard. "Well, I think that's just about the nicest thing anyone has ever said of me. Shannah: messenger of Adonai!" she exulted. "Most men are just looking to get into my purse, but you have found your way to my heart." Then, poking him in the ribs with her elbow, she chuckled "But opening the heart doesn't close the pursestrings, you know," she winked.

Shel, trying to work out a plan for Shueh's protection, but being out of his depth, asked "You have been thinking of this longer than me. What do you suggest?"

"Simple," she pronounced. "Don't go to Yerushalayim at all." But as Shueh looked at her suddenly with confusion, she motioned with her head back down the path she had come. She put her finger to her lips and then pumped her open palm down several times in front of her. "I have company," she mouthed, pointing back down the path. "Husband's body man." Then, speaking loudly again, she said "Here's what I think is best," she said aloud as she knelt down to the ground and began to arrange a few stones. "Here we are at the seaside," she said as she moved a small chip of limestone into a cleared spot. "And here's

Yericho, Yerushalayim,” she said as she placed more stones.

“What’s your hometown, love?” she cooed at Shueh.

“Um, Natzrat,” he hesitated a moment, but then reached out and placed another stone.

“Right. Way up there? Anyway, we get to Yericho and then I make something happen. What’s that? I don’t know. What do you think I am, a prophetess? I can’t predict everything.” As she prattled on, her face and hands were telling a completely different story. Shueh was too taken in by her narrative to understand what her hands were saying, but Shel, being of a similar conspiratorial nature, caught her meaning easily. He smiled so widely that his teeth shone in the starlight. He nodded his understanding as he tapped his forehead with two fingers, acknowledging the soundness of the plan.

And then she stood up abruptly and announced, “We’ll think of the rest of it when we get there. But when you’re ready to leave that stifling hole and head back to civilization, send word. I’ll find a way to get Shimon on board for the trip to Yericho.” Shueh was confused as to whether this was part of the real plan, and held up questioning hands. Shel knowingly took a hand in his and said “It will be done, *HaG’virah*.”

Then turning about she practically shouted into the night air. “It is absolutely frigid out here. I must get back to my tent or I’ll turn into a pillar of ice. A nice compliment to Lot’s wife’s pillar of salt. Isn’t that around here somewhere?”

“You do that. Now, help an old, fat woman to find the road again. That’s right. No, I can find my own way home. I’ll be just fine, thanks. What is another turn on this old ankle. I have another one, after all.”

The two men stood silently as her voice faded into the night. Shueh’s eyes and ears pricked sharp to see if he could sense the tail that had followed her, but he could detect nothing. After a moment, they both turned to head back up the road to Secacah. After just a few steps Shel tapped his ear and thumbed back over his shoulder. He had heard the crunch of sand under a secret footstep. They both smiled and disappeared into the night.

27 Iyyar - A Foolish Son is his Father's Ruin Proverbs 19:13

"Ten measures of speech descended into the world," muttered Qayaffa, "and women took nine."

Gamaliel smiled wanly at the old saw. "Yes," he agreed, "but had she not talked as much, we would not have this knowledge."

"And if I had not planted a spy in Shimon's entourage, we would know nothing at all," Qayaffa politely reminded his counterpart. "Let me see if I've got this right," the high priest complained as he waved a fly from his face. "First, Shimon's woman badgers him into revealing his errand, then she barks at him to lie in wait at Ein Feshkha instead of keeping under wraps in Yericho, then somehow miraculously figures out that the pretender is holed up with those fanatics in Secacah, and then not only makes contact with the him, but makes plans to facilitate his escape?" Qayaffa wrapped his sweating brow in his large, meaty hand, then brought it slowly down his entire face, rubbing his eyes, cheeks, and chin until it stroked his chin through his wiry beard. "So," he said at length, "Shimon's plan to bring him here cordially is ruined. What do *you* think will happen now?"

"The road to the Galil leads through Yericho," Gamaliel said blankly. "My guess is that Shushannah will probably pretend to come clean with Shimon and try to score some points by introducing him to the Galilean. She'll probably demand another stop in Yericho on their way back here for another visit to the market. Then, in the night, she'll be some sort of latter-day Rachav and let him climb down a scarlet cord to escape up the Yardan valley."

"Then we put a stop to that long before it even begins," Qayaffa pronounced. "We must intercept them before they even get to Yericho. I hope your son will not be too indisposed if we capture his prize before it manages to slip from him. It'll save him some embarrassment at the very least," he justified himself. "He thought about his plan for a moment, and then suddenly his eyes brightened. "I've got it," he exclaimed. "I will send El'azar down there with a small contingent of armed *shomrim*. It will get him out of the city and give him something to do."

“And the prize will be ripped from the Sanhedrin,” Gamaliel said with barely concealed contempt, “and belong to the high priest’s family alone.”

“I am only doing what is necessary to rescue the situation brought on by your son,” Qayaffa spoke with precise and quiet tones, masking his own contempt. “The bonus is that the *shomrim* can bring him in under cover of night. Our interviews can be conducted with the locals none the wiser, and should we have need of resolving the situation, well, it will be much easier without any loose ends.”

“How beautifully quiet and tidy,” Gamaliel mocked. “But don’t do it so quietly that Pilatus doesn’t know of how you have averted yet another rebellion. That would be a squandered opportunity indeed.”

“You would rather have another rebellion, then?” barked Qayaffa, on the verge of losing his temper.

“Heaven forbid,” Gamaliel countered. “But wouldn’t it be nice if we could just do our own business without having to seek the approval of *Rom*?”

“You live in a distant and ill-remembered past,” Qayaffa said as he put his fingertips together, rubbing his index fingers against pursed lips. “Herodos is gone and his sons are unworthy of his legacy. The sooner you accept the *pax Romana* the easier your life will be, my poor *Perush chaver*.”

Gamaliel considered a response, but could think of nothing that would not sully the prince of the Sanhedrin even more. He bowed slightly and retired to let Qayaffa return to the ministrations of his manicurist while he considered if it were possible to get his own word to Shimon.

28 Iyyar - And He Bowed Himself with All His Might

Judges 16:30

Shueh had finally found the solution to patching the kiln. The stones found on the slopes above Secacah were all limestone and marl. While marl was a great source for clay to make fine pottery, it was useless as a building material. Limestone also would not hold up against the repeated and intense heat of the kiln. What was wanted was good granite, but unless one could send to Sela, it was not to be had in this region. He had devised a plan to cast some mudbricks of the right size and shape to patch the hole from the inside, and to cover it over with limestone to protect the new mudbrick from rain and sun. He had never before worked with mudbrick and had therefore had to mix five batches with different amounts of crushed marl and mud from the seashore. He had fired these samples in the smaller kiln, which was still working fine. Having found the right mix, he wormed the upper half of his body into the broken kiln and measured distances and angles with his eyes and fingers. He then moved his operation to the sandy soil just outside the compound's back door where he dug out forms for each of the three pieces he would need. Kemal, noting the weariness that frequently afflicted this otherwise vigorous man, had helped him procure more mud from the sea shore and watched him with intense interest as he carefully mixed the marl and mud to the right consistency and then forced it into the molds.

Two days later he deemed them sturdy enough for firing and carefully transported them, one at a time, back to the broken kiln, where he carefully installed them. He was proud that they fit perfectly the first time. Sometimes he amazed even himself, he thought proudly. But then he remembered who he was, and quickly repented, giving the credit to his Father. Before firing the new mudbricks, he had the pleasure of shaping limestone slabs to fit snugly over the top of the rent kiln cover. This was what he was used to: easily finding the internal grain of the stone and working with it to make shards pop off to reveal just the right shape underneath. A little bit of sloppier mud was poured into the narrow gaps between the new stones, and the kiln's regular operator was given leave to fire up the whole thing.

That was three days ago. Now he and Menachem stood side by side watching the first batch of ceramic platters being pulled from the kiln. Many racks of raw clay platters awaited their turn in the furnace, but this batch was of high quality and had taken less time to fire than batches previous to Shueh's patch.

"*Mazla tava*," Menachem crowed as he slapped Shueh's shoulder. "That is the finest work I've seen around here in a long time."

"Fine enough to be called miraculous?" Shueh needled him.

Menachem's good humor instantly evaporated in a solemn stare. He then looked down at the ground for a few moments before screwing himself up to look Shueh deep in the eyes. Shueh returned his gaze without flinching or hesitation. It didn't take any supernatural powers to know exactly what Menachem was thinking: Was this prodigious worker and learner really the Son of God? Should he support him in this claim and announce him to his fellowship as *Mashiach*?

Finally he spoke. "Come, Yeshueh ben..." He hesitated. "Yeshueh," he finally pronounced. "We must speak."

Menachem led him toward the *heichal*, but passed by the stairs leading up to it and down around its southeast side where Shueh had never been before. Menachem brushed past a hanging carpet and ushered Shueh into a small room, spare but tidy and clean. A bedroll was folded up and stowed in a wooden frame on the wall, yielding space for the two men to pull cushions from pegs on the wall, place them on the floor, and sit crosslegged facing each other.

"Welcome to my little home," Menachem started. "While the brotherhood here does not believe in personal property, it does grant me the right to a separate room in order to have private conversations just like this."

Shueh knew that Menachem was reluctant to discuss the topic at hand, so he decided to break the ice immediately. "When we last spoke, I asked you consider whether the concept of an unknowable God came from our own scripture or from *Goy* philosophy, and if the latter, then the existence of a personal God, an infinitely wise and immortal man with fingers, toes, a behind, and a long white beard, could actually exist. I also wondered whether you felt any comfort in the thought of this

immortal God being able to, according to processes we are not familiar with, but dissimilar to the *Goy* tales, become the father of a mortal man. Have you come to a conclusion on either of those points?"

"When considered by itself, separated from scripture, the tale is not hard to believe," Menachem answered eagerly. "If such a God did exist, then why couldn't he accomplish just that?"

"But you cannot bring yourself to reconcile it with scripture," Shueh prompted.

"Try as hard as I might, I cannot," Menachem admitted.

"To you scripture is the final word," Shueh explored. "Since it is the word of God, it is infallible and easy to understand. Is that correct?"

"I have always felt that way," Menachem agreed.

"And the reason for the disagreement between you, the *Perushim*, and the *Tzadukim*, all of whom read the same *Torah*, comes from where?" questioned Shueh.

"Because they interpret things incorrectly," Menachem replied quickly, and drew breath to further explain himself.

But Shueh stopped him. "Interpret? Then you admit that, needing interpretation, the text is not as clear as it might be?" Shueh waited while Menachem sought to order his ideas, but then thought it best to intervene again. "I'm not here to quibble with the meaning of scripture, Menachem. We could bash each other over the head for hours about the meaning of arcane passages of scripture. I personally would relish a contest with such a learned man as yourself, but that is neither healthy nor good. All I want to know is, while you were considering the questions, did you feel good about the possibility of my story?"

"Like I said, the story on its own causes me little trouble," Menachem affirmed. "It has a kind of childlike wonder to it."

"But when you compare it to scripture, or may I be so bold as to say, your interpretation of scripture?" Shueh queried.

"Yes, that is where the conflict occurs," Menachem agreed.

"One might be justified in wondering whether the problem lies with the part that causes the conflict," Shueh prompted. "But for you, a man whose entire life revolves around the preservation and dissemination of the written word of Adonai, this would be

too hard a choice. I do not envy your position in all this, my friend."

"If what you postulate is true," Menachem argued, "then most of what I have known to be true for my entire life is false. How can I be untrue to such a calling and faith?"

"If what I postulate is true, nothing else makes a difference, does it?" Shueh looked him squarely in the eyes. "But asking you to follow such an idea appears to you as desperate and final as Shimshon pulling down the pillars of the temple of Dagon on top of his own head."

Menachem let his eyes wander for a moment and then returned to Shueh's gaze. "That is it exactly," he marveled. "It feels like you can see directly into my soul."

"Since Adonai can read the thoughts and intents of your soul," Shueh said gently, "would not his son be able to do the same?" Again Menachem's eyes wandered, but at length his gaze remained affixed to the floor and would not return to Shueh's eyes.

"Do not be afraid, my friend," Shueh assured him. "My Father has not yet granted me that power. But I can discern a little more than the average person, perhaps just due to my attentiveness and experiences."

Still looking at the floor, Menachem said "I admit, it is unsettling the way you see and explain things. Being the one who has always had the final word in things, it is an almost untenable situation to be put in to have so much doubt and uncertainty about things."

"You're never too old to learn new things," Shueh assured him.

"How old do you think I am?" Menachem looked up with feigned injury. Then his face melted in a smile. "You're right, even to one who is near middle age himself, I must appear to be ancient of days."

"Then I hope the wisdom that has accumulated upon your head and shoulders will see a way to help me find my way," Shueh said.

"There are those who are adamantly against you going forward here," Menachem said, returning to a more businesslike demeanor. "I have counseled long with them. The brethren

Tzuri, Mordechai, and Yuval are still not in accord, but I have convinced the majority to at least allow you to proceed with making the covenant of the Sons of Tzaduk, as much may be revealed to you there. But as for gaining the support of the entire community, that will have to wait until the full gathering of all the brethren on *Shavuot*.”

“That is indeed a great concession you have won, wise Menachem,” Shueh praised him. “It is more than I could have hoped for before I came to your home. I thank you from the depth of my bowels.”

“After the Sabbath meal in two days we will proceed with your initiation ceremony. I would ask you to fast and pray between now and then, but then I remember that you have been doing so for much longer than is required already.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever looked forward with as much fondness to the *Shavuot* feast,” Shueh admitted with hungry eyes. “Forty days is a long time, no matter what Moshe says.”

Chapter 7

Author's Notes

Those who do not concern themselves with geography while reading may have imagined when Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan on the road going down to Jericho that he is describing a road that leads directly to the city gates. Even today roads follow the natural contours of the land. The slopes leading down to the Jordan Valley were most accessible where today's Highway 1 leads. It enters the Jordan Valley some four miles south of Jericho. A good road loops back up to the city gates before it doglegs off toward the site of Beth-Abara. There is another track that splits off from the main Jericho Road at the Adummim Ridge. This track does indeed lead directly to Jericho, but it was not as widely used, as it spent much of its time clinging to the edges of cliffs. These two roads diverge near the ruins of Second Temple period Roman watchtowers, at the feet of which one can find the modern Museum of the Good Samaritan. The site displays Byzantine foundations of a building which plausibly might have been built over a previous site, which the proprietors claim to be the very inn mentioned in Jesus' parable. Certainly, where there were watchtowers, there would be commercial infrastructure to support the troops. A waystation with food, water, toilets, and a bit of shade would have been an ideal stop for travelers who had begun their trip before the light of day to reach Jerusalem before sundown.

Jericho is also a city that appears in our mind as the great walled city blown down by the trumpets of Joshua. That city, or its even more ancient predecessor, lay in ruins a bit off to the northwest of where Second Temple period Jericho was built up. Southwest of the town was a series of palaces built by Judean rulers over the preceding century or so. Herod the Great added to a preexisting Hasmonean palace, and then remodeled and added to it twice more, calling it his Winter Palace. But like Versailles from Paris, it was at some distance from the city proper. Herod's newest addition featured baths, apartments, and pleasure gardens straddling the *wadi* along which ran the secondary track from

Jerusalem by means of an elegant bridge. Near the end of this bridge was erected a 50-foot mound atop which was placed a pillared structure that had views of the entire valley.

2 Sivan - A Burning Lamp that Passed Between those Pieces

Genesis 15:17

Shel exited the stuffy confines of the dining hall, exulting in the tradition of having a day without physical labor, something that until the last few months had been totally foreign to him. He stretched his arms as a sudden yawn engulfed him, threatening to separate his jaw from his skull. The heat of the sun directly overhead and the fullness of his belly tempted him into retiring to the shadow of the compound to doze for a while until Shueh emerged from whatever he had been doing in secret since last night. But just as he was about to slide down the wall, he looked out to the end of the table land and saw a figure seated on one of the rocks at the edge. It was Shueh. Somehow he had gotten out here without Shel having seen him. He rubbed the gathering sleep from his brows, inhaled sharply, and jogged the 100 paces to where he found Shueh looking out over the deep ravine that ran down toward the distant sea.

“*Rav*,” he panted as he stopped by his side. “I am sorry I missed you. How long have you been here?”

“An hour, perhaps a little more?” Shueh said absentmindedly.

Shel didn’t know what to say. He was not Shueh’s bodyguard, nor did he have any duty to wait on him constantly, but he felt sorry that he had not been present when whatever ordeal Shueh had been through had ended. Lacking words, he crossed his legs and let himself down beside Shueh and waited for him to talk.

Down on the shores of the Salt Sea another flock of migrating birds flew in from the south. Their cries could not be heard at this distance, and so their movements seemed to be slowed down. A trio of goats were slowly making their way up the *wadi* scouting for stray tufts of green someone else might have missed. The cave openings to his right looked like shadowed eyes staring at him. Above him, thin clouds, high enough to escape the Yehudi hills, were beginning to cast a faint gauze over the harsh sun, a welcome relief at this hot noon hour.

“I’m officially one of the Followers of Light, I guess,” Shueh said at length. “I wasn’t expecting it so quickly, but

Menachem somehow convinced the rest of the brethren that my initiation should go through. Apparently it needed to be done before this next week. It won't be official until then, but for now at least, the sacrificial bones from my inaugural dinner have been interred in the courtyard underneath a broken jug."

Shel had noticed the uneven ground in several of the less frequently used courtyards and noticed that just under the dust he could see shards of ceramic at frequent intervals. He waited for Shueh to explain further.

"They do that, you know," he eventually continued, "kind of a token to set your vows in stone, as it were. At the communal *Shabbat* meal last night they sacrificed a young ram. No altar, just next to the firepit. But they kept a cup of blood. After the meal they took me to a corner of the courtyard where they had me bury the bones from my portion of the ram, and then broke a new jug over the top of it, one of the ones that just came out of the kiln I fixed earlier this week. I had to press down the shards and cover it with dirt. Like a grave, almost. A little bit of *torah* chanting and a lot of cheering. It felt good."

"I think I heard some of that," was all Shel replied. Again he waited for Shueh.

"That was just the beginning," he went on without much pause this time. "They took the cup of blood and dabbed it on my earlobe, thumb, and big toe, just like Moshe did with Aharon. And following that pattern, they took me into the big *mikveh* by the dining hall, had me take off my loincloth, and washed just about every part of me. When I came out, they anointed just about every part of my body with dribs of oil. Then they had me crawl into one of their types of undergarments, not easy to do when you're sopping wet. All this while they chanted more *torah*. It is not quite how I had imagined the process from *Vayikra*, but close enough that it was recognizable."

"And he called?" asked Shel, doing his best to translate the Hebrew word Shueh had just said.

"Oh, sorry, I meant the third book of Moshe in *Torah*," Shueh explained.

"That is the title of the book: *And he called*?" Shel asked again.

“It is the first word in the book. Unlike the *Goy* who give their tales titles like *Iliad* or *Argonautica*, we just name our books by the first word in the book,” Shueh said. “It is a collection of instructions for the priests to conduct sacrifices, what we can eat and cannot eat, and many other things dealing with daily life. The story is told there how Aharon and his sons were brought to the door of the tabernacle and washed, clothed, and anointed. That’s what happened to me.”

“But there is no tabernacle here, right?” Shel asked.

“The Sons of Light believe that the tall building at the entrance to the compound is a *Heichal*, every bit as good as the temple in Yerushalayim. And naturally that was where we went next. Not the whole crowd. Just me and Aitan, my mentor. I had been just inside the door of the place a week ago with Menachem. It’s just a little nook at the top of the stair with a lamp on the wall and a curtain for a door into the rest of the building. Here Aitan whispered my secret name to me, only to be known amongst the Sons of Light and never spoken anywhere else. Then he held up the curtain and I entered a slightly larger room. It was still very dim, and more than just a little spooky. Aitan stood beside me with a lamp hung from a rod. It didn’t burn cleanly like olive oil, but more like animal fat: smoky and smelly. Waiting there was one of the brethren. He wore a very loose red robe, had his face all painted, and had a pair of heifer’s horns mounted on his head. From what I figured out later, he was supposed to actually be a heifer. He made me kneel on the floor and swear obedience to all the laws of *Torah*, especially all the laws of sacrifice. Then I had to prostrate myself, forehead on the ground, and answer ‘Amin, Amin, Amin.’

“Then the strangest thing happened,” Shueh said slowly. “As I was rising from the ground, a figure dressed all in black...I couldn’t even really see him...jumped out from a corner and nicked my neck with a very sharp little blade. It drew blood! He hissed at me that if I ever revealed the words of my oath, that God would do so to me, and more also, a phrase found several times in our scripture.”

“It is not unknown to me,” Shel affirmed. “All our oaths are sworn that way, including the bloodletting, although it is usually

on the forearm. But are you not in danger, now that you have revealed it to me?"

"Revealing anything to you is just like me talking to myself, Shelyeshu'a, my closest friend," Shueh assured him. "Menachem may feel otherwise, but I feel sometimes that you have become my other self."

Shel was immensely pleased inside, but all that showed on the outside was a slight bow of the head, downcast eyes, and the almost imperceptible twitch of a smile at the corner of his lips.

"Anyway," Shueh continued, "Aitan held the smoky lamp aloft and led me through the curtain behind the heifer-man where I was presented before another man, this time dressed up as a she-goat, complete with fleecy robe and twisted horns on the top of his head. When I saw him, I finally understood the reason for the heifer-man, goat-man, and smoky lamp.

"There is a story of Avram in the first book of Moshe, how Adonai caused him to go out into the night and cut in half a heifer, a she-goat, and a ram as a prelude to Adonai establishing his covenant with Avram. He also had two birds, but these he didn't kill. As he sat with the birds, looking back down the bloody path of the butchered animals, he saw a smoking furnace that passed between the pieces of the carcasses. The Sons of Light were recreating this event in the darkness of their *Heichal*, except instead of sacrificing actual animals, they were dressed up as those animals. The animal's blood was to be my own. I knew the next room would have a man dressed as a ram, and that there would be two more appearances of the black man and his blade, although I did not know where he would strike.

"While Aitan held the smoking lamp beside me, the she-goat spoke to me of obeying laws, not just of obedience and sacrifice, but of how to get along with others more peacefully. Again I prostrated myself and said *amin*, and sure enough, the black man appeared again, but this time cut me on the chest. You can see it here," Shueh said as he parted the top of his robe and pulled aside the new undergarment to reveal a red welt about a thumb wide across the center of his chest. "Another hiss of 'all this and more' if I didn't comply."

Shueh closed his robe and looked off into the distance for a moment, lost in thought. "The more I think of it, the more the

ceremony becomes clear; takes on meaning. Nothing I can really express yet, but it is deep, Shel. Maybe even the Sons of Light don't understand everything they say and do, but it just has the whiff of being ancient, and the antiquity of it lends it weight and meaning."

Shel did not try to press him for any more insight but waited patiently for the rest of the story to unfold.

"We went back to the previous room where I had not noticed a steep, wooden stair that went down to the floor level. When we got to the bottom, I was pleased to find a ram-man waiting for me in the light of Aitan's smoky lamp. I'm not sure they're happy with me about this one. The ram-man's admonition was that I should be chaste, which of course he meant to be celibate. Before I was going to prostrate myself and risk getting my privates sliced, I reminded him that I was married and would continue to try to obey the first command given to Adan. Ram-man seemed disappointed, but not completely flustered. He reiterated chastity within marriage. I was nervous about where black-man would strike next, but luckily he didn't give me a second *bris*, but simply nicked me low on my belly, right through my new clothes.

Rubbing his belly lightly, Shueh remarked "That one hurt a little more than the others, but at least I knew that in the next room there would be no more cuttings, as Avram had not butchered the birds in the original ceremony. Sure enough, though, in the last room I met a bird-man in a wide robe of white with wings mounted on a cap on his head. His admonition was that I should give everything, absolutely everything I own to the Sons of Light. This was almost too much for me, but I was assured that this would take effect only if I was accepted by the rest of the brethren. When I went to prostrate myself, bird-man corrected me to remain standing and to lift my arms as if they were wings while I said the requisite *Amin, Amin, and Amin*.

"This was all I was prepared for from Avram's story. I didn't have the slightest idea of what would come next. But the bird-man stepped aside and a light appeared dimly through the curtain behind him, and I heard Menachem's voice asking me to repeat each of the promises I had made in the previous rooms. Apparently I got it right, because Menachem opened the curtain

and ushered me into a rather large room. All of a sudden the covers were taken off the tops of about a dozen lamps, revealing at least two dozen brethren stuffed into the room. It was like being there when Gidon's men revealed their lanterns in front of the *Midyani*, except they didn't yell quite as loud. It was a happy moment, I must admit. How they got there I'm not certain. I guess they must have slipped down the stairs while I was busy with the she-goat man."

"So that's it?" Shel asked. "You're one of them now? What happens next?"

Shel waited again for Shueh to continue, but this time the pause was uncomfortably long. Shel was almost ready to repeat his question when Shueh finally broke the silence.

"No, that's not it," he said in a low voice Shel could barely hear. "The vows I swore, what do they mean to you, Shel?"

"No more than you do your whole life," Shel immediately assured him. "These men and their vows, they are not higher than you."

"Well, maybe the first three," Shueh admitted, "but the last one? That I should give everything, absolutely everything I own and am?"

"But that is only if you join with these men," Shel countered. "And I don't see you doing that in the end, no?"

"Whether I join with them or not is not the issue," Shueh shook his head. "I know you're just seeing this whole thing as an initiation rite into some secret society, Shel. But to me it is more than that. I'm doing exactly as Avram did, and the covenants I cut were not with Menachem and his bunch, but with God."

"But we did that when Yoni washed us," Shel shook his head in confusion. "I remember his words: 'You covenant in the name of Adonai that you are willing to follow his ways all the days of your life.' Is that not enough? What more is there to promise?"

"I'm glad you have remembered those words so exactly," Shueh reached out and grasped Shel's shoulder. "Most people will not remember what they promised to do, much less the actual words that were said. But that is all the struggle that Adonai demands of most people, every now and again to remember what you promised to do. Then try again to do it."

Shel knew what to say next. "But you are not most people, no?"

"No, I guess not," Shueh laughed ruefully. "Avram was a good man before he cut his covenants, and then he became Avraham. Even you must know the story of Avraham. He is your people's father as well."

"Except we call him Ibrahim, and Ismail, his firstborn, was his *true* heir," Shel corrected Shueh with a smile. "But yes, the story of Ibrahim being called to kill his heir upon the mount is told to every misbehaving child in my land." Both men shared a chuckle and knowing nod. "But what has this to do with you?"

"His heir, whatever his name, was all that he had," Shueh said, returning to a serious voice. "And God told him to kill his son. It was the absolute worst thing he could have been asked to do. Yes, it turned out to be a test of his faith, but he didn't know that until he lifted the knife over his bound son."

"I feel after reenacting Avraham's covenant that I too have become like him. God will soon ask me to sacrifice everything that I have. It is not just that I cannot return to my life as a happy stonemason, I have to find a new life and discover what is demanded of the *Mashiach*, how to live my life every day. And that's not even the hard part."

"That is hard enough," Shel assured him. "You think there is more?"

"You are not steeped in our tradition, my friend," Shueh explained, "So although you see our animal sacrifices, and regard them similar to your own, you do not know what they mean."

Shel shook his head ambivalently, wanting to say that he knew plenty, but acknowledging that he probably didn't know enough. "What do they mean?"

Shueh took a sudden deep breath, looked up to the tops of the cliffs above them and said very deliberately "I fear there is no ram in the thicket for me."

Shel looked up at the cliffs with him. "But just like climbing those cliffs, it is yet afar off."

"Yes," Shueh looked back at Shel. "Many, many days, I hope. But looking ahead to the near future is easier to see. Five days from now will be *Shavuot*. Every year most of their

adherents travel from their homes all across *Haaretz Yisrael* for a renewal of their vows. Anyone that has been initiated in their *Heichal* the previous year is presented and must be accepted by the whole community. Usually it is one of their own that has made the pilgrimage here to Secacah several times and whose reputation is already known, so I'm not absolutely certain of the outcome."

"If you are accepted?" Shel wondered aloud.

"Then I've got backing and a support system throughout the whole land," Shueh pondered aloud. "Not Yerushalayim, of course, but it is yet to be foreseen how that den of thieves will be won over."

"You know I once made my home in such a den," Shel reminded Shueh. "I don't think we ever compared ourselves to the high and mighty of such a great city."

"Not my words, Shel," Shueh smiled. "I was quoting Menachem on that one."

Shueh put out his hands on the ground behind his back and leaned back to gaze up at the skies. They had clouded over significantly during their conversations, and the sun's orb was now just a bright, bleary form amid the gray. He could just make out a pair of birds of prey, swooping and sailing in the currents of the sky with barely a flap of their wings. His mind was called back to the symbolism surrounding the bird-man in the last chamber of the *Heichal*, and how it was similar to the outstretched wings of the ark of the covenant in the holy-of-holies in the temple at Yerushalayim. The mercy seat, where the priest could approach Adonai directly. Yes, he had come closer to Adonai than any man alive today, he thought. But at this moment the light of God's knowledge was veiled and bleary as the sun through the clouds. Oh, that he could mount up on the wings of those birds and approach heaven's mercy seat to know what he should do. Avoiding Qayaffa's knife and getting the backing of the Sons of Light were just two steps along the way. Along the way to where? He had experienced such a steady and almost overpowering flow of insight and comfort while atop his mountain hideout with only Eliyahu and Moshe to keep him company. Now that he was in the company of holy men in the shadow of the *Heichal* he felt cut off. Why was he not being

supported as he had before? Were the traditions and teaching of the Sons of Light wrong? Should he flee from here and go back to the mountain? No, he felt the same glow of truth behind their ceremonies and teachings. But it was like the reflected light of the moon at night, not the glorious rays of the sun at noonday. Was God testing him? Was he being sent out on his own, as Adan was when he and Ava were cast out of the Garden? He would just have to keep his faith strong, his eyes open, and his ears ready for whatever might happen next. Oh, how he wished Miri were here with him. He would have been able to have shared more with her about his thoughts and feelings than Shel. He remembered that *Shavuot* was but five days away. Not only would his forty days of fasting be complete, but he could fly to her arms and take comfort in her presence.

“Fly to her,” he willed in his thoughts to the birds just beneath the clouds. “Let her know I long to be with her, and that we will soon be together.”

2 Sivan - Does the Eagle Mount Up at Thy Command?

Job 39:27

Miri's *Shabbat* morning at Salome's had been wonderful, but seeing her hold hands with Chaim during the blessing of the bread had caught her off guard. She had suddenly been struck with a yawning emptiness, not unlike in the days after she had lost her child and her chances at childbearing. Why was she here? What was she doing? Although Salome had kept her busy in the garden, at the grindstone, and on walks to and from the spring, she felt purposeless. Her life would not begin again until Shueh called for her. And although it was much closer now, it was still almost a week away. How could she fill the days until then? And what awaited afterwards? An unspoken fear filled her in her darkest moments. Would he join with the men of Secacah and leave her alone? Was God's rending of her womb only in preparation for the tearing of her soul when she lost her living husband to the seclusion of that community? Or would they take him from her into the world and present him as their long awaited *Mashiach*, leaving no room in their preparations for a mere woman? The great ones of old: Gidon, Moshe, Dawid, Eliyahu, did their wives actually figure in any of their stories? Would she continue to be relevant to his, or was her job simply to have brought him to Yordan to begin a work that did not include her?

She said her farewells to Salome and her children with as much hope and happiness as she could muster, but then walked up the track to join the road that led down to Yochaved's tavern where she kept a lonely room. It was not proper for her to lodge in the home of Salome or Sara, their husbands being there and her not being family, although she knew she was welcome. The generosity of Shannan had given her the means to take room and board at Yochaved's, but she had chosen a cramped and spare closet that offered little comfort except sleep at night. She could, of course, sit in the common room as much as she desired, and she did this often, trying to listen in on conversations of the many travelers and merchants who ate there. But again she felt more like a spectator of life than one of its participants. She muttered to herself as she looked up to the little patches of gray

sky she could see through the tree canopy above her. Did God even listen to her anymore now that Shueh was not here?

She startled and almost missed a step as she heard a booming voice behind her. "I almost didn't see you there, Miri. I almost stepped on you." Miri turned with a sudden smile at the sound of Yoni's voice, but she also aimed a playful kick at his shins. "Yeah, yeah, yeah, I'm so short you can't even see me. Will that joke ever get old?"

"Not until you get older and grow up to the height of a normal woman," Yoni laughed in a teasing response. "You're heading back to your room for the evening, no doubt. I believe I have a message for you. If you'd be so kind as to take your dinner with me and Aviva, I'll see if I can deliver the message."

"A messenger from Secacah?" Miri gasped. "Did he send word?"

"If he had sent a runner, I'm sure the message would have gone directly to you," Yoni admitted. "But I'm pretty sure you'll be well satisfied with the message I have to give you."

"Tell me now," Miri reached up and tugged at his tunic. "Why should I have to wait?"

"I don't know," he said as he disentangled himself from her grasp and turned her around to point her back down the main road. "I was just told that I should invite Miri to dinner and tell her what I had heard. I'm just following directions."

"You can be so maddening at times," she groused with mock anger.

"Oh, you think so?" he asked with a hint of exasperation. "Just ask poor Aviva. She has to live with it every day."

"But dinner won't be until after sunset, it being *Shabbat* and all," Miri dragged out the argument.

"Then you'll be good and hungry," he said as he stepped off the road to cross the field that led to the other side of town.

"And where are you going?" Miri asked. Pointing down the road she said "Dinner is that way."

"If you have nothing to do until dinner, yes," he called over his shoulder. "But some of us have things to do before we can tuck into Yochaved's fried catfish dinner."

“You are the absolute worst,” Miri scolded, with more sincerity than teasing. “Just rub it in, will you? Not everyone is as busy or as important as the prophet of Beth-Abara.”

“Mmm-hm,” Yoni responded noncommittally, letting Miri have the last word.

Miri stepped with much more haste up to the road, and then down to the tavern. Yoni would not have been so positive had the message he had for her been bad news. It could only be good news, but how good she did not know. She hoped for a word from Shueh, but would be content in learning that her broker had arrived back in Yericho and that she had access to her own funds again. Living off of Shannah’s donation was easy enough, but it was niggling at her to be living off of someone else’s charity. In only a minute she was crossing the *chatzer* to the path that led to the back door where her room was located. She stopped off at the *sherutim* to lighten herself, but also to freshen up her face in the bowl of water Yochaved always kept on a shelf, fresh and cold. It was at least an hour until dinner would be served, so she took the time to walk through the undergrowth that led down to the bank where, on that marvelous day only several weeks ago, she had experienced the same thing her Shueh had: a voice from heaven and an overwhelming sense of peace, security, and love. She found the spot, took her sandals off, and holding on to a tree branch, dipped a toe in the slowly flowing water. That would be the closest she would ever get to going into the river, but it was enough to bring her back to the events of that day. There was more sky visible over the width of the river and the bare plain beyond. She looked up, turning her head to her left to look southward where Secacah lay. Her gaze lighted upon a pair of birds soaring high in the air, circling down towards the eastern cliffs of the Salt Sea. “I wonder what Shuehh is doing this *Shabbat* afternoon,” she wondered to herself. “Probably closeted with a bunch of old men teasing meaning out of dusty texts,” she admitted, “but wouldn’t it be nice if he were out somewhere, seeing the same birds I am?” With that, she uttered a short plea and set it winging heavenward. “Let my Shueh come back to me, if you can let me borrow him for a little longer.”

She was startled out of her reverie when she heard the clang of the bell that announced dinner for all the tavern boarders. Her

senses coming back to the present, she caught a whiff of something frying in oil, and her mouth automatically watered for the taste of fish. No, catfish wasn't the same as the fish that came from Ganessaret, but at least it was fish. She pulled on her sandals and quickly picked her way back to the dining room.

When she entered she found Aviva and her children Yiska, Ram, and baby Naomi finding their seats at their regular table. But she also saw Yoni, Andreas, and Sara pushing another table and chairs over next to it, with their three children scampering about. She was delighted to be taking part in a multi-family feast. It was always so pleasing to her to have the energy of children at the table, probably because she didn't have to deal with it on every other day. She plowed right in helping Shaul, Sara's youngest, climb into a chair far too big for him and removing the stick from his hand that he had picked up along the road before it could clobber his bigger sister who was fussily arranging her clothes next to him. Greetings were called back and forth, along with the whining of children who had either decided they did not like fish or wanted a bowl of fried turnips just this instant. After the flurry of Yochaved's girls setting out dishes and cups, platters of steaming fish, bowls of turnips, baskets of bread, and pitchers of milk, wine, and beer, the noise suddenly subsided as the food was eaten. Elsbet, Sara's middle child, had decided she did like fish after all, and ended up eating more than Miri herself. Before too long the table was being cleared away, Andreas was pressing a few coins into Tiki's hand, and the children were spilling out onto the *chatzer* to run about and burn off their newfound energy. Shaul was the last to go, hollering "Wait for me, guys," after Sara had finished wiping his face and hands with a napkin.

Yoni had kept a few pieces of bread back from Tiki, and was wiping his platter with it to soak up as much of the succulent fish sauce as he could. "You have been a patient girl, Miri," he said. "I thought you would be demanding to know the news from the very beginning."

Andreas looked startled. "She does not know the news yet?" He asked.

"And he knows it?" demanded Miri defensively. "Why does he get to know it before me?"

“Because the messenger told me to tell you over dinner,” he replied. “Remember I said that already? The messenger had no such instructions for when and where to tell Andreas.”

Miri sighed in exasperation while sharing a knowing glance with Aviva.

“Well, out with it, old man,” she demanded. “Dinner has been served, eaten, and cleared. I want my message.”

“Your message is this: shortly before noon on the *Shavuot* Eve you should be waiting to meet your husband with everything you own at the road leading up to the Ma'aleh Adummim.”

“He’s coming? He’s finally coming?” Miri practically danced in her seat. “But wait,” she paused. “On *Shavuot*? Wasn’t he supposed to spend that day in Secacah and leave afterward?”

“I don’t know,” Yoni said blankly.

“You don’t know? Why didn’t you ask?” she demanded. “And where will we be going from there? Up the road back to Yerushalayim or to Yericho and Galil beyond?”

“I don’t know,” Yoni repeated.

“So the messenger from Secacah comes to you, tells you to have me meet him on *Shavuot*, and then turns around without another word, and you don’t ask him any questions?” Miri was bewildered. “That may be enough information for a man, but we women like to know a few more details.”

“The messenger was not from Secacah,” Yoni corrected. “If he had come from there, I naturally would have asked for more detail.”

“Not from Secacah?” Miri asked in amazement. “Then where on earth did he come from?”

“That’s just it, Miri,” Yoni explained. “He did not come from earth.”

Miri blinked to absorb the information while her lips slowly puckered. “Ohhh,” she breathed.

“Yes, Miri. Now you see why I was very careful with the way I delivered the message to you,” Yoni said softly as he bent down over the table. “Earlier this afternoon Ram and I had gone up the path to Eliyahu’s hill to check on his birdlings; a nest of hatchlings he found last week on a trip up to the spring. After we had seen they were safe, Ram hurried home while I decided to walk home much more slowly. I happened to look up and saw a

couple of birds, eagles maybe, I can't see well anymore, way up in the sky down over the Salt Sea. Before I could wonder about them I heard a voice say 'Invite Miri to dinner and tell her: Shortly before noon on the *Shavuot* Eve she should be waiting to meet her husband with everything she owns at the road leading up to the Ma'aleh Adummim.' I turned about to see who had spoken to me, but there was no one there. Just the smell of the balsam trees."

"Ohhh," breathed Miri in response, her eyes opening wide and glittering in a smile that slowly enveloped her whole face, "that messenger. No," she admitted, "it is difficult to ask a question of such a messenger."

Yoni looked over at Andreas and held up a hand whose fingers slowly counted up to three. His timing was off by a heartbeat or two, but as he had predicted, Miri was not done.

"Wait," she said. "Why did you feel you could tell Andreas, and why is he here anyway? The messenger did not direct you to do any of that."

"The words of such a messenger are to be followed exactly," Yoni said, sharing his own knowing look with Andreas, "but that doesn't mean it has to be limited to that. I'm not going to have you straying out on that road by yourself, nor do I want you two to disappear into the night without me getting word back on where you're headed and what Shueh is going to do next. Andreas will be the one I send as messenger and guide."

Everyone looked around at each other, and no more words needed to be said. But Miri piped up anyway. "You know Yoni," she needled him, "you don't always need to be so cagey."

"No," he admitted, pushing himself back from the table and brushing breadcrumbs from his beard and tunic. "But it sure is a lot more fun that way."

But before he could stand up, Yochaved called from the kitchen "Wait! I made plum cobbler."

"Should we call the children?" Sara and Aviva asked, almost in unison.

"No, not yet," answered Yoni, motioning with both hands for Yochaved to bring the cobbler. "Let's see if it's any good first."

3 Sivan - And David Remained in the Wilderness Strongholds

1 Samuel 23:14

“My skin feels like it will slough off, like a lizard’s,” El’azar complained to his host, a distant relative of Herodos who was allowed to remain in the Great king’s winter palace, as long as he kept a spot open for government officials from Yerushalayim.

“We are in possession of many ointments and salves that are concocted for the very purposes of anointing the skin of those who are not adapted to the dryness of the climate of this region,” his host proffered. “May I present a selection of them for you to choose?”

El’azar, who was already growing weary of his host's florid speech, said “I’ll take some of what you use.”

“Oh, that is not possible,” his host tittered. “Because I have lived here so many days and years, my own body has become mostly accustomed to the...”

El’azar, not wanting to hear the man’s history, cut him off. “Then get me some of what your wife uses.”

“As your excellency requires,” the host bowed, somewhat abashed at not even having been allowed to finish his sentence. He motioned to the servant who was not far from the man’s elbow, a man that El’azar had already marked for a man from the far north. His hair was white, but not with age; it still flowed nearly to his shoulders. His skin had an unnatural color, more red than brown, as if the sun had singed his hide. As the servant bounded down the stairs, El’azar wondered what would happen to his own hide if he had to stay here for any extended period waiting for the Galilean to appear. While he waited, he looked around him at the surrounding villa. It had been built for Herodos *HaGadol* years ago, but seemed to have been kept up well. He stood in the shade of the porch of the grand reception hall. He had had to climb a long set of stairs, but it was worth the view. The entire palace complex visible from here, gleaming white pillars of porticos and stoas mixed with the green pillars of trees that were tended and pruned to be high and shapely. In addition to looking over the palace, the hill provided a commanding view of the entire city of Jericho. Beyond the palaces at his feet was a narrow band of well-watered orchards

that separated it from the city proper, a sprawling lot of dingy multistory buildings crammed under the shadow of what had once probably been the fabled walls of the Canaanite city supposedly toppled by Yeshueh's trumpets. To his right he could see all the way out to the Yarden river, and to his left rose the path of the narrow road he was to guard.

Earlier today he had come down this path instead of using the main road from Yeruashalayim that entered the Yarden valley about three miles south of Yericho. Qayaffa thought if the Galilean pretender were to head to Yerushalayim, he would not do so on the main road. Shimon's woman had clearly warned him of the danger that awaited him. If he did not flee to the Galil, he would stay the night in the city proper, and then ascend to the Yehudi hills through this back passage. How could he know he would be watched from Herodos' palace, right here at the start of the back passage?

This had been Qayaffa's plan, but El'azar was going to go even one better. On his descent into Yericho he had detached half of his *shomrim* at Kypros, a watchtower Herodos *HaGadol* had built on a rise just a mile up the path from the palace. The other half he had sent as incognito as possible through the outskirts of Yericho to camp out at whatever the next village north of town might be called. He had also parked one of his own servants in a room near the city's south gate.

With his own resources put in place, he had his servant purchase the services of two or three farmers on the road outside the south gate of Yericho. The farmers were to send runners both to him and the palace when they sighted Shimon's party. His servant would get a good look at the Galilean and follow him, whether toward the Galil or up the ascent to Yerushalayim. If toward Galil, the servant would attach himself to the pretender's party, signaling to the *shomrim* who waited to the north to arrest everyone in his party. If toward Yerushalayim, the same would happen when the servant was sighted approaching Kypros.

He thought it as near a perfect plan as could be contrived. The town was not abuzz about the presence of *shomrim*, and intelligence was to be gathered by locals and shared only with an unknown man in the city. Presumably he had told his spies some tale about wanting to be ready when family arrived, or some

such innocuous story that would not arouse any undue suspicion. He, meanwhile, had entered the palace with only a single attendant, and although his host had almost immediately recognized his position and importance, the few others that might have seen him probably took little notice of his visit.

The sun-bronzed servant was bounding back up the stairs with a package in his hand. El'azar expected him to deliver it with heaving lungs and rubbery legs, but the man placed it gently in his host's hand and returned to his post, standing squarely with only a few deep breaths before he was perfectly still. El'azar wondered if there was more vitality in the air in this low valley?

"I hope you will find this ointment to your pleasure and liking," the host said as he placed the package in El'azar's awaiting hand. "Some may consider its pungent fragrance somewhat feminine, but I find..."

Again El'azar interrupted his host. "I'm certain I will find it both pleasurable and to my liking," he said, pulling a small clay pot from the package and smelling its odor already. Then, remembering his manners and that he might need a favor from his host, he tried to match his effusive speech, he asked "May I be so impertinent as to inquire at what time the evening repast will be laid out, and where in this plentitude of palace that location might find itself?"

His host smiled broadly, and stretched out his hand to point out the location, narrating the palace's layout and history with delight. El'azar shut his ears and opened his nose as he removed the lid of the pot, pinched a sample of the ointment between his fingers, and rubbed it between his eyes and down the bridge of his nose. If dinner were anywhere near as good as this ointment, he would be happy indeed. If Shimon were to delay his departure from the Salt Sea a few days longer, what of it?

4 Sivan - Man Does Not Live by Bread Only

Deuteronomy 8:3

Since the next night was the eve of *Shavuot*, the followers of the Sons of Light had already begun arriving from points near and far. Shueh had barely caught a glimpse of Shel as he and Kemal were constantly kept busy welcoming the arrivals and

getting the men and animals appropriately lodged. A barrier had been set up at the end of the ridge adjoining the compound to the east, behind which sheep, cattle, and asses brought by the pilgrims could safely be placed, as the cliffs were too sheer to permit the escape of anything but the most sure-footed goat. These were tied to pegs just inside the enclosure. The men took up residence on the table land upon which Shel and Shueh had been camping for the past weeks. Each man was issued a ceramic bowl for the communal meals, newly fired in the kiln Shueh had repaired, and a small shovel for use at the *sherutim* higher up in the canyon. Shueh had given up his prime spot near the door in the quest for a little personal space, but had soon given up on it, and decided instead to relish the flood of humanity with their various odors, accents, and stories. It was good to hear a few of them speak in his native dialect, but he found none that he knew personally or through friends.

With this great influx of humanity, and all the business that had to be conducted by the permanent residents of Secacah, dining in the communal dining hall, with all its rigor and ceremony, was replaced by feasts held outdoors. The visitors, some of whom had been here many times, worked on reinstating the great firepit along the southwest edge of the open space. After selecting animals from the pen and announcing the name of the pilgrim who had provided it, the animals were butchered and roasted over the firepit. Shueh wondered from whence the firewood for the blazes came, but ended up marking it to the preparedness and tradition of the Sons of Light and their many pilgrims. Steaming bowls of hearty stew were ladled out morning, noon, and evening. Besides the tender mutton or beef and the barley indicative of the nature of the celebration, the stew was supplemented with beans, lentils, peppers, and even young gourds. It was, after all, the feast of the first fruits, highlighting the incoming barley harvest as well as the harvest in general. Offerings made to the group were given in the spirit of consecration. It was a blessing to be able to give and to share.

Besides the constant stream of men involved in the cooking and eating of vittles, the *mikveh* at the head of the open space was in constant use, causing a line to form in the shade of the compound's walls. Another line, less crowded but nevertheless

constant, was made of men who carried their shovels over their shoulders headed up and down the canyon. To the south, in the direction of Ein Feshkha, more than a few pack animals could be seen laboring to bring more fresh water from the spring for drinking and bathing alike. In the days prior to the arrival of the pilgrims, this place had been almost completely still, broken only by the murmurs of prayers and the rolling of scrolls. The memory of that place was banished by the much more pleasing milieu of men and animals. Shueh could imagine that after several days of this, however, one might long for the previous stillness.

The first night there had been perhaps four dozen visitors by nightfall, but tonight there were over two hundred. Even more were expected to arrive right up until sunset the next evening, the official beginning of *Shavuot*.

As the sun sank towards the western cliffs, Shueh could tell by a commotion in the crowd that something was organizing itself from the amorphous, milling crowd. He began to hear the word *Mashiach* rising above the general murmur. At the moment, Shueh was engaged in a conversation with a couple men from Tiberias who knew of the fisheries at Migdal Nunayya, and they were trying out names back and forth to see if there were any connections between them.

“He’s from the Galil?” someone was heard to ask loudly.

“Who’s from the Galil?” one of his new friends called back.

“This supposed *Mashiach*,” came back the call.

Another man near him erupted in laughter. His friend asked him “What’s so funny?”

“The *Mashiach* from Galil?” replied a man with the accent of the maritime cities. “Can anything good come from there?”

“Sardines,” called Shueh’s other Galilean friend.

“Those little fingerlings?” hooted the maritime man. “They are nothing in comparison to bream or groupers. Those are *real* fish.”

“But what about *Mashiach*?” came another call, just when Shueh was hoping the topic of the argument had been changed. “I also heard not only that he is Galil, but that he’s *here*!”

With this exclamation the congregation erupted into a fury of sound that had not been heard here in years. Shueh parted

himself from his two Galilean friends and strayed toward the far end of the table land where there were fewer people. But before he could move too far through the crowd, he heard a ram's horn being blown noisily from within the compound. The sound ebbed for a moment while everyone looked to see what the sound signified. The door to the dining hall that adjoined the field suddenly burst open and Menachem came striding into the gathering calling loudly for quiet. He was quickly followed by another high-ranking Son of Tzaduk who tried to catch up with Menachem. Shueh recognized him as Tzuri, one who had never come to accept Shueh's presence at Secacah. Shueh sank down to squat on the ground, hoping against hope not to be recognized. Nervously he sketched some designs in the dust with his fingertip, nothing more than interlocking circles and lines, but it helped him concentrate while appearing aloof.

"Peace, brethren," Menachem was still calling. "What is the cause for this uproar?"

The inarticulate crowd roared back with words that include "*Mashiach*," and "Galil," and "here."

"Let me speak and answer you," he bellowed as best he could. When the murmur had died down, he continued "Yes, there is one among us who has brought forth a Messianic claim. Such claims are rare and not to be taken lightly, but they must also be proven if tragedy is not to ensue."

"Then let us meet him," someone called out from the crowd. A chorus of "yea" and "amin" arose from across the crowd.

"You will do just that, but it will not be until the proper time," Menachem had to shout over the crowd to get it to quiet itself again. "The proper time is when the entire body is gathered. That is not until at least tomorrow night. I had hoped to do it in the full light of day on first *Shavuot*, and with your permission we will wait until then."

Shueh heard a murmur of "why not now?" and "why wait, it is *Mashiach*" being passed from one man to another.

"It is because," Menachem started to shout, but he was interrupted by another stronger voice.

"It is because there is more to this person's claim than just being *Mashiach*," Tzuri shouted.

“Tzuri!” Menacham shouted. “I am master here. You have not been given leave to speak.”

“Your mastery may soon be coming to an end,” Tzuri shouted back with surprising venom. “You have asked us to do the unthinkable, the most vile, the most blasphemous thing I have ever heard in my life.”

“Tzuri, there is a time and a place...” Menachem tried to quell Tzuri’s tirade.

Shueh knew the time for hiding was past. He heaved himself to his feet and began to work his way through the crowd to where Tzuri was holding forth.

“The time and place is now and here,” Tzuri bellowed. “Before we sully these sacred grounds any more, before the holiness of *Shavuot* is fully upon us, we must detect this blasphemy and cast it out.”

The crowd was speechless. Quizzical looks were shared all around, but no one dared to speak at Tzuri’s accusation of blasphemy and the calling out of the master.

“I call the perpetrator of this blasphemy to...” Tzuri began once more to cry out, but he was interrupted by a calm voice directly in front of him as Shueh emerged from the crowd.

“Here am I,” he said. And then, speaking in the thickest Galilean accent he could, he asked, “What do you require of me?”

Tzuri was clearly startled that Shueh would present himself so quickly and unabashedly. But he caught the intonation of Shueh’s first statement. “*Here am I* indeed,” he mocked. “Are you Yeshayahu come from the altar of Adonai with pure lips?”

Shueh did not deign to answer such a preposterous question, knowing that it was simply said to bait him and the crowd. He waited for Tzuri to continue.

“Well, Yeshueh ben Yousef *miBeit* Yehuda from Natrat, we will come right down to it,” Tzuri pronounced slowly, putting particular emphasis on the name Yousef. “Do you claim, or do you not claim, to be the Anointed One, the one who has been promised since the beginning, the one who will save Yisrael from all his foes, the one who will gather all Yisrael?”

“I make no such claim,” Shueh called in a loud voice.

Tzuri was stunned. "But Menachem said ... he said you claimed..." he stuttered.

"It is not I who make the claim, but the claim is made," Shueh again called, turning to the crowd. "The claim was made by Yochanan ben Zekharyah beit Levi of Yerushalayim, lately of Beth-Abara."

The crowd stirred somewhat. Apparently many had heard of Yoni's ministry and it seemed to carry some weight among them.

Tzuri, finding his footing once more, shouted "And do you deny this claim, this audacious claim made by a man gone mad in the desert?"

Shueh saw that the crowd reacted unfavorably to Tzuri's judgement of Yoni. He decided to use it to his advantage. "Is not Yochanan ben Zekharyah a prophet? Does he not attract a substantial audience, some of you being among the believers, I assume?" he asked of the crowd. "I mean, what did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?"

With the crowd murmuring their approval of Yoni, he turned back to Tzuri and looked to him to continue.

"So let's get this straight," Tzuri seemed to have fumbled his initiative and sought for grounds to recover. "You say that Yochanan claimed you to be *Mashiach*, whether he be a prophet or not makes little difference. What matters is, do you accept this claim?"

The crowd became utterly silent. Shueh did not have to speak loudly to be heard by all of them. "I would never deny the pronouncement of a prophet. Would you?"

Shueh could see that, for now at least, he had the upper hand. The crowd thought it plausible that Yoni was a prophet, and Shueh's claim was not self-made, but put in the mouth of the prophet of God, and he was merely being obedient to God's word. If he could only get Tzuri to relent at this point, then the matter could be handled under Menachem's supervision in a much more conducive atmosphere. But he sensed Tzuri would not relent, but bring the matter to its head right here and now.

"So you rely on the claims of others to support you. I find that admirable. Humble and admirable," Tzuri seemed to concede. "The claim, however, should still be proven." The

crowd grudgingly agreed. When Tzuri saw he was back in their good graces, he decided it was time to drop the other sandal.

“But there is a claim that you have made, is there not?”

Shueh bit his lips and thought desperately to find a way to reply. But his mind was suddenly a stupor of thought, and he demurred to say anything else that could be turned against him.

“What is that claim?” he demanded of Shueh. When no answer came, he turned to Menachem, who stood shaking his head dumbfounded. “What, dear master, is that claim? You know of it, do you not?”

Menachem was also wise enough not to give in to the demagoguery, and pleaded with Tzuri to restrain himself. “This is not the way.”

But Tzuri was full of himself and could not be dissuaded. “Not only does this man, this Galilean, not dispute the claim that he is *Mashiach*, but he claims something even greater. Something so intolerable that I find it hard to even bring myself, a man completely devoted to the pursuit of God’s light, to take such a blasphemous claim in my lips.” The crowd awaited in stunned silence, awaiting the next sentence. “Yeshueh ben Yousef claims Yousef of Natzrat is not his father. He claims, oh be strong my soul, he claims that he is the Son of God.”

Utter pandemonium erupted throughout the crowd. Never had anyone heard such a claim, nor dreamed of hearing such a thing. Many were so aghast at the implied blasphemy that they shoved their fingers deep into their ears, shook their heads, and chanted the *shema Yisrael* over and over. Others opened their mouths and eyes in wonder as their knees buckled under them. They were heard to utter *hosannah* under their breath. But most were outraged and could find nothing more to express their distress than to shout at their neighbor and demand whether they had heard the claim.

Shueh caught Menachem’s look, one of complete dejection and apology. He then looked over to Tzuri who was looking out over the tumult and rejoicing in it. His hands grasped the lapels of his robe and he swayed back and forth as if dancing to some unheard rhythm. Gradually he heard a chant begin spontaneously from several spots in the crowd: *hilul hashemem*. Holy is the name. Holy is the name. Holy is the name.

When Tzuri thought the crowd was beginning to subside just the tiniest bit from their passion, he called their attention once more. "Silence, my friends," he called again and again until they were finally quelled.

"But there is a simple solution to this, you know," he said in a honeyed voice in a condescending tone. "We put him to a test."

"Test?" the crowd wondered aloud. "What is the test for being the Son of God?"

"The test is simple," Tzuri shrugged. "We are gathered to celebrate, among other things, the end of the barley harvest and the beginning of the wheat harvest. Barley and wheat are for bread and beer. We need both in great abundance as we celebrate Adonai's bounty to us in this season of harvest. I say that if Yeshueh ben Yousef wants to prove himself Yeshueh ben Elohim that he manifests the power of godliness that is in him, show us something that none of us could possibly do without supernatural power."

The crowd murmured their assent, immediately grasping the hope of seeing some otherworldly miracle to prove that God was in their midst. Those who were already on their knees, pressed their hands together in supplication, hoping to have their faith affirmed. Others wondered what the impossible challenge was that Tzuri was going to set.

"I understand that you have been fasting for almost forty days, my friend," he intoned. "You must be extremely hungry. Is that so?"

Shueh gave no reply.

"And are not we all hungry?" he egged the crowd on. "Do we not all want bread?"

Pointing to the two stones that stood to either side of the entrance to the dining hall he called out as loudly and clearly as he could. "Yeshueh ben Yousef, if you are the son of God, command that these stones be made into bread."

Shueh had no reply. He did not know how to alter substances, although he was certain it could be done. In his visions on the mountain he had seen the way the world had been rolled together. He had witnessed particles so minute and so numerous as to be unimaginable, and yet those particles combined in different patterns to create everything around him.

How hard would it be to look into a loaf of bread and compare it with what he knew about rocks and command the elements to transform themselves.

“Watch this, brethren,” Tzuri called out to the crowd. “It is about to happen. This will prove that he is indeed God come down to earth. You’ll be able to tell this story to your children and grandchildren. You were there. You saw the Son of God turn stones into bread.”

At this moment Shel appeared from out of the crowd. Shueh instantly wondered where he had been all this time, but then remembered his many chores. With Shel’s appearance, the memory of that fateful night just six weeks ago came flooding back: when he had tried to bring Shel back from the dead. He had been Shar then, a criminal, a robber, a very bad man. Shueh had tried to turn a dead criminal into a live, good man. It had ultimately happened, but Shueh had not seen it. His Father had heard his prayer and changed the very elements that made this man’s body. Surely, now he knew exactly who he was and was resolutely trying to fulfill that role, God would hear him and teach him how to alter the elements of limestone to become the tastiest wheat bread these people had ever tasted. He closed his eyes to envision the transformation.

But even as the patterns emerge, an even greater thought sprang up. This was it! This was the answer he had been searching for these last forty days. His body began to shake uncontrollably as if he had plunged suddenly into a cold stream. He envisioned himself holding up a perfect loaf of bread, crunching its perfect crust as tiny bits flaked off. He imagined the roar of the crowd as they realized who he was. He thought he could foresee them marching in droves into every corner of the land proclaiming him the Son of God, and people falling at his feet wherever he went.

At this moment, Shel knelt down next to him and silently brought his eyes down to Shueh’s level. Shueh felt his nearness and willed his eyes back open. He found a penetrating and unwavering gaze of infinitely deep brown eyes framed with concerned brows. Shel ever so slightly shook his head left and right. He could almost hear him whispering “not here, not this way, not now, not for this man.”

As if Shel had been an angel sent to him to strengthen him in his moment of temptation, a new resolve suddenly filled his entire body. The shivering was gone, replaced by a warm glow that started from his breast and pervaded every particle of his body. That same clarity of thought with which he entered the waters of Yordan returned. He didn't know what to say, but he knew he must open his mouth and recite. He rose up and stretched out his right hand in the general direction of both Tzuri and the stones. The crowd collectively drew its breath and held it.

Then he turned to face the congregation. When he opened his mouth he heard a clear and convincing voice say "It is written, *And He afflicted you, and suffered you to hunger, and fed you with manna, which you knew not, neither did your fathers know; that He might make you know that man does not live by bread only, but by every thing that proceeds out of the mouth of Adonai does man live.*' Mashicah has not come to give you bread you or your fathers have known. He has come to give life through his words. I give you no bread of wheat or barley, bread that you would soon be marching up that hill to bury with your little shovel. I would give you instead the words of eternal life." He then turned back to Tzuri. "But you will not have it. You would rather have bread and circuses than God himself."

The crowd was dumbfounded. On the one hand his voice was commanding and unbowed, but on the other, he did not produce any miracle. They didn't know quite how to react. Tzuri was confused as well. He had not expected a scripture in rebuke to his challenge that he thought was legitimate. He was obviously searching his mind for a comeback, but was as yet unable to find the right one.

Shueh looked up at Menachem, who was as confused as everyone else. Shueh stepped up to him, took his hand and said "I thank you for your hospitality and kindness, for your wisdom and protection. Perhaps we shall meet again someday?"

Menachem was initially even more confused. But a sudden insight filled him. No, Shueh could not stay. Not after this. As soon as Tzuri found his retort, he would whip up the crowd to the point that they would rip Yeshueh in half. "Go with God's blessing, my son," he pronounced out of a daze.

With that Shueh took Shel by the shoulder and pointed him to the eastern wall of the table land. Somehow the crowd did not react to him passing through their midst. They were too busy berating each other about what this all could mean. Shueh reached the stones that formed the low wall, looked back over the crowd and the compound, and then over to Shel. "I'm afraid I will have to leave my chisels behind," he said sadly.

"Chisles," Shel asked incredulously. "That's all you can think of at this moment?"

"Well, it's all I really own that is precious to me," he shrugged.

"You're getting out of here alive," Shel said in exasperation. "That is good enough."

"As ever, you are right, my friend," Shueh said as they both stepped over the wall and stumbled down the incline to the lower shelf. Before them lay the ground they had seen while approaching Secacah, a field full of dead men's flesh and bones under mounds of dirt and rock. Above them twilight stretched from the west to the utter dark of the eastern mountains. As they picked their way between the mounds, the roar of the crowd behind them was slowly lost in the chittering of insects.

"I was looking forward to a hearty bowl of stew tonight," Shueh said dejectedly. "The end of my fast is so near, and I am indeed hungry all the time. But no dinner tonight or quick bite in the morning. Do you think the roadhouse would still be serving anything? Perhaps just a pitcher of something?"

"No roadhouse," Shel shook his head. "It is full of *them*," he spat, thrusting his thumb over his shoulder at the distant crowd. "We will go to the cave where we met lady Shoshannah. There is water near there. I will get Shoshannah and her man, and she will take us to safety."

"I'm glad at least one of us is thinking," Shueh sighed. "I'm in a sort of daze right now."

"Your thinker is weary," Shel laughed. "You did some quick thinking and talking back there. I have never seen a man so beaten."

"He was, wasn't he," Shueh admitted. "But it wasn't me who said those words. They just came out of me."

Shel was thoughtful for a moment as they approached the easier grade of the road. "What suddenly comes out of a man is not from somewhere else. It is him. It is deep-down-him. When I was Shar what was deep-down-me came out suddenly as daggers and blood. What comes suddenly out of you is pure truth, both *Torah* and *targum*. If you think that didn't come from deep-down-you, then you have not found deep-down-you yet."

Shueh put a hand on Shel's shoulder and gripped it hard. "I'm thinking, with you to guide me along the path, I might find him yet."

"First we find the cave," Shel said. "Then we find you."

They found the cave less than half an hour later. Shel left him there while he scouted around in the dark for the water Shel had mentioned. It was but a seep under a wide swath of scrubby bushes. He tried pressing his hand into the soil to form a bowl into which a few drops of water could pool. But the water was foul. He returned to the road and climbed the few precarious steps up the cliff side to the cave and found a rock to rest himself upon. His mind was a whirl that he could not contain: shouting crowds, bowls of stew, how he might have said more or better words, and Miri's face. He would soon be seeing Miri! It was with this last happy thought that his mind paused enough to let it slip away into the world of dreams.

He awoke with a start sometime later. Shel's hand was on his shoulder. The hint of dawn was just making the eastern mountains visible.

"Wake up sleepyhead," came Shannah's lilting voice from below on the road. "The road is long and we must hurry. But don't you worry. My dear husband has roused himself and the whole camp. We are here with some nummy breakfast and plenty of wine. We have to either finish it up or pour it out, you know."

Shueh looked down and spied Shannah waving from inside her sedan chair. Her husband also nodded a slight hello. Ahead and behind stretched a small entourage that carried all the baggage befitting a high-ranking member of the Sanhedrin and his rich wife.

"Sorry," Shel whispered as he helped Shueh rise. "There's no sedan chair for you."

“I would find it very awkward,” Shueh admitted. “But where is this wine and nummies she’s talking about?”

Chapter 8

Author's Notes

Some of us may have a more detailed and accurate image of Jerusalem than Jericho in our mind, thanks in large part to the Holyland Model of Jerusalem. It is a 2,000 square meter 1:50th scale 3D model of what Jerusalem might have looked like just before the Roman siege of 70 CE. Originally a private memorial to the owner of the Holyland Hotel's son, it was so well executed that it has been moved and moved to a prime location right next to the Shrine of the Book, the home of the Dead Sea Scrolls where it has become a national treasure and a tourist attraction.

The Temple Mount is the premier landmark in this model. If you view an image of the Holyland Model in an online image search, you'll note on the south wall of the temple complex a long roof stretching along the entirety of one wall. There is disagreement as to whether this roof reached the corners of the wall, or if there were towers rising higher than the roof at the corners. Indeed, there is some evidence and tradition that the southeast corner used to be crowned by a tall tower from which *shofar*, or ram's horn, may have been blown at special occasions like a new moon, Rosh Hashanah, or the end of Yom Kippur. Christian tradition has marked this out as the "pinnacle of the temple", from which Jesus was tempted to leap. The elevation from the top of this tower to the valley floor straight down below would have been some 150 feet, equivalent to a 12 or 13 story building in our day.

Because of the detailed descriptions in Biblical and other Talmudic sources, the exact layout of the temple precinct is almost unanimously agreed upon. Although the exact location of the *Lishkat HaGazit*, the place where the Sanhedrin met, is not known, it is generally accepted to have been along the north wall of the holy precinct.

5 Sivan - You Shall Appear Before God on the Feast of Weeks

Deut 16:16

El'azar had not been able to sleep late this morning. He sensed that today could very well be the day. Not just a feeling, but a calculation. If he were planning on announcing himself as *Mashiach*, he would definitely do it at one of the feast days. *Shavuot* Eve was tonight, which meant that travel to the city had to be accomplished today. The trip from Secacah was around twelve hours, he imagined. Long, but manageable. An early start was required though. He figured that he should hear something by the end of the fourth hour if was going to hear anything at all today. If nothing happened today, he could lay low for three more days until *Shavuot* ended, because anyone pretending to be the Anointed One would not dare break *Torah* and travel during that time.

He had taken his breakfast in the second hour and then treated himself to a long bath. The bath house here was amazing. He had allowed himself the full *Romim* treatment with shave, strigil and oil, although there was only a tepid bath. He had walked up and down the portico on the north side of the *wadi* several times, trying to focus on the smell of the trees. But ever his mind was rethinking his plans. What if the farmers missed the passage of the group? That would be impossible. Shimon traveled with all the comforts of his office and his wife's money. But what if the farmers were on Shimon's side and didn't report him? How could they possibly take sides? Country folk in this area couldn't possibly be aware of the rivalry between them. What if his servant missed them in town? What if they didn't come into town but circled on the outside and headed directly for the Galil? Or what if the pretender broke ranks and traveled on his own?

When he couldn't take it any more, about halfway through the third hour, he crossed the bridge over the *wadi* and laboriously climbed the stairs to the pavilion where he had surveyed the area two days ago. He leaned against one of the pillars while he caught his breath. When he could stand again, he looked out over the city to the north and the farmland to the east.

They must be out there now. Somewhere on that road. They just had to be there.

His eye spotted a movement along the road that led behind the pavilion and up the *wadi* to the ascent to Kypros. It appeared to be a boy, weaving artfully between the carts and animals spread out sparsely on the road. The back of the building cut off his view of the road, and the boy was still running along it as he lost sight. His initial excitement began to sour into doubt once more, until he heard a scuffling under the trees at the base of the pavilion mound. Soon enough the boy was at the base of the stairs asking one of the palace servants which way he should go. He knew it. He knew it had to happen today. Just as he had predicted. And now it was happening. El'azar felt his pulse quicken with excitement.

"Here," El'azar called in a loud voice, waving his hand. "Up here, my boy."

But the boy hesitated, mouthing something to the servant while his hand first tapped his chest and then pointed up the stairs. El'azar then realized a farm boy would not know the first thing about approaching an official such as himself, and on such grounds. He motioned to his own attendant to go down and bring the boy up.

While he waited for them to come back, he found a chair and sat down. The boy must get the full treatment, after all. It would not do to stand to receive such a lowly one.

His attendant and the boy came up together, although the boy's lungs were not affected by the climb as were the attendant's.

"Report?" El'azar barked the single command, trying to instill even more unease in the boy. He was certainly nervous. His head was half bowed between stooping shoulders. He didn't know if he should stand or prostrate himself, apparently.

"*Maran*," the boy began. At least he had manners enough to use an appropriate title. "*Maran*, we saw them. They were heading into Yericho half an hour ago."

"You're sure it was them?" El'azar demanded.

"Yes, *maran*. Eight donkeys, fourteen people, and a sedan chair with room for two," he dutifully replied.

“And the fourteen people you saw,” El’azar had to know more particulars. “Was any of them a man and his wife from Galil?”

“A wife? No, *maran*,” the boy replied, ducking a little. “A man from Galil, yes. But no wife.”

The boy shuffled slightly as El’azar cupped his chin in his hand and thought for a moment. She was not there. That probably meant that she was still in whatever that wretched village was where the baptizer held forth, or she had come to Yericho already and was waiting for him there. If she was over Yardan, the pretender might escape that way, a contingency that was not covered by his plan. Panic began to set in.

“Boy,” he asked, “do you know where my servant is staying in Yericho? The other place you were supposed to send runners?”

“Yes,” the boy stammered. “Yes, my brother was sent there. I know the way.”

El’azar motioned for his attendant to open his purse and pay the boy. “Here is what we promised your father. And take a little extra for your own trouble, but you must run as quick as you possibly can to your brother in the city and tell my servant that he is to watch even more closely, and be prepared to watch the road to the river, to that little village, what’s it called?”

“Beth-Abara?” the boy suggested.

“Yes. That’s the one,” El’azar confirmed. “Be ready to watch the road to Beth-Abara, and send word immediately if he goes that way.”

The boy almost took off without his coins, but stopped after the first stair and turned around. The attendant was holding out a couple coins in his hands for El’azar to inspect. “Yes, that will be sufficient.”

The attendant put the coins in the boy’s hand, upon which the boy flew down the stairs, taking two at a time and disappearing into the trees as he raced back toward the road.

El’azar gripped the ends of the armrests in a subdued gesture of victory. He had done it. He had predicted it. There might be a ragged end to his plan, but he had just stitched that together. Qayaffa would be impressed with his planning and quick thinking. Now all that remained was to catch them in one of the

two nets he had placed. After all the excitement and early rising, El'azar found himself suddenly drowsy. The pavilion behind him did have a fully furnished triclinium. He climbed out of the chair with some effort and went to search for a suitable couch. He motioned for his attendant to bring him something to drink, but found himself dozing before it could be brought to him.

As he dozed, he felt the urge to awake several times, but reminded himself that everything was in place, and he should be well rested when the moment actually came, and so convinced himself to stray back to his dreams.

When it came time to awake, his body did not want to respond. But his attendant was tugging at his sleeve and whispering in his ear. "The boy has returned."

"What hour is it?" El'azar demanded grumpily.

"It is about the sixth hour, *adon*," he replied dutifully. "You have slept almost two hours."

"Where's the drink I ordered," he asked. "I need a drink. I'm parched."

The servant motioned to the glass of wine on the central table of the triclinium, upon which was also laid a plate with freshly sliced fruit. El'azar took an eager swig of the wine, wiped his lips, and motioned for the boy to be brought in.

"Report?" El'azar barked again from his reclined couch.

"They are on their way to Yerushalayim," the boy said quickly. "They will pass by here in just a few minutes."

El'azar sat up. Just a few minutes? They hadn't stayed long in Yericho, but then they couldn't, could they. Shimon was also a devout believer, and would have to arrive in the city before sundown. Then he remembered.

"The man from Galil," he demanded. "Was the man from Galil still with them?"

"Yes, *maran*," the boy replied dutifully. But he was bold enough to answer the next question too. "No wife, though."

El'azar did not know what to make of this. Perhaps the man was being extra prudent and leaving his wife out of any danger, or maybe just wise and not burdening himself with that extra baggage for such an important event. But they were on their way, and going past the palace as well. He would be able to see them, perhaps?

Forgetting the boy, he dragged himself out of the couch and brushed past him on his way out onto the porch. He was stopped by a word from his attendant.

“*Adon?*” he asked, pointing at the boy.

“Oh, by all means, give him what he’s due,” El’azar said as he continued out onto the porch and around to the east side to get a view of the road. He saw them immediately. They were still down the road a considerable distance, but he could make out the concentrated string of beasts, burdens, and a sedan chair being carried by four attendants. The closer they came, the more detail he could make out. He thought he could make out a man walking alongside the litter wearing a light blue and white robe, definitely not the attire of a servant. This must be the pretender! Then he noted that one of the curtains of the litter was drawn back, revealing a fat arm perched on the chair’s edge. The arm was clothed in a golden-yellow fabric. This must be Shimon’s wife. The Galilean man and Shimon’s wife were engaged in conversation. He felt a little empathy for the pretender. That woman could talk anyone’s ears off without the man having learned anything useful at all.

He was suddenly aware of the boy standing not far off, also gawking from the height down upon the road. The perspective seemed to be new to him.

“Everything is different from up here, eh?” He smiled at him. “Well, you’re right about that. In more ways than one.”

The boy didn’t seem to hear him. “There he is, the man in the white and blue robe. That’s the man from Galil.”

“Well, he won’t be from there for long, not if...” El’azar began to say, But he thought better of saying any names or events that should better not be said. “Off with you now.” And to his attendant he said “We will be leaving here in a half an hour. No, not back to the city, not today,” he answered the attendant’s questioning gesture. “The time is too short. We will bring them back here.”

He looked back down as the entourage slowly passed. Then he spotted his servant, fifty paces behind. After a moment, he saw the servant briefly turn his face to look up at the pavilion. Seeing his master there, he put a finger to his brow, and then resumed his slow walk. El’azar knew better than to signal back.

He practically danced down the stairs. At the base of the bridge he found his host coming across it.

"I understand you are leaving? I thought you were here for many more days," he said, appearing to be disappointed, but El'azar could see right through that ruse.

"Oh no, we're not leaving. I'm just going on a short trip up to Kypros to take possession of some things I left there. We will be returning. And I will be bringing a man with me. He will, um, not want to be here, so he must be accommodated somewhere safe so he does not leave. Am I clear? And I don't want anyone to know he's here."

His host bowed slightly. "I understand. We have an excellent keep up in the old palace. I will keep the staff that attends to his needs at a minimum. Do you know how long he will be staying?"

El'azar could see the calculations the man was doing in his head. "Don't worry," he chided. "We will leave as soon as *Shavuot* has ended, and you will be reimbursed for both my expenses and his. Speaking of expenses, do you have a mule I could borrow for a few hours?"

El'azar returned to his room where he had his attendant help him into shoes and outer garments more appropriate for the road. Then he returned to the front court of the palace where he found the mule and its driver, who helped him mount onto the clean and overly ornate blanket. With a click of his tongue, the driver coaxed the animal out the gate. El'azar noted that he was followed not only by his own attendant, but a pair of young toughs belonging to the palace. They passed under trees belonging to the palace's orchards on a track that quickly joined the road that led to the ascent into the Yehudi hills and Yerushalayim beyond.

As they passed others on the road, El'azar graciously accepted their looks of wonder with a polite nod. As pleasing as this was, he soon tired of it, and decided to hold his gaze aloof. There were very few parties heading toward the ascent, and he watched almost all of them depart the road to squalid huts or farmlands along the way. But soon they were alone on the road. He had stalled enough that Shimon's party was already out of sight. He would be happy to have them cool their heels for a time

at Kypros, wondering why they had been detained. Make Shimon sweat, he mused.

The mule driver was leading his beast at a fast clip, but his attendant and the toughs were keeping up well enough. El'azar looked in wonder at the scenery around him. He had never taken this route before. The *wadi* that on the plain gouged only a modest trough in the land was soon lost at the bottom of deep canyons. Above him sprang up ruddy colored cliffs that faded as they rose, only to be topped by another, even higher cliff in the background, fading off into the haze of the day. He caught a murmur or two from the toughs who kept a polite distance behind him, or was it a safe distance behind the mule, he didn't care. He enjoyed the quiet and solitude. Before a quarter hour had passed, he began to catch glimpses of Kypros' towers and walls to the left of the road. And sure enough, where a track led off the main road up to the fortress, he saw a knot of beasts and burdens surrounded by his own toughs from the temple guard.

Before he was even within hailing distance, he saw Shimon jump out of his litter and come striding towards him. "What is the meaning of this?" he was shouting. "Why have you done this to me? Am I not the deputy leader of the Sanhedrin? You have no right to do this."

"I have every right in the world to stop you in your treacherous perfidy and take possession of your charge," El'azar said in a rehearsed tone.

"Perfidy? How am I guilty of deceit? I have done exactly as directed," Shimon sputtered. "And here I am trying to get back to the city on time, and you detain me here while you come clip-clopping at your own leisure? This is low, El'azar. Even for you."

"I think not," El'azar replied coolly. "Not only will Qayaffa be much more pleased with me than you, but even your own father will be embarrassed of you. Listening to the prattling of a woman as she tried to throw spikes in the wheels of state. Who will tolerate such behavior, I wonder?"

"Prattling of a woman," Shimon laughed, suddenly changing his demeanor entirely. "Prattle? She has bested you and your brother-in-law this time. Oh, I can't wait to see how this one blows over in your house."

El'azar was caught completely off guard. "But you were charged to wait in Yericho and entrap the man and his wife to bring them to the city. Instead you spent two weeks at some beach resort soaking up the sun. Look at you!"

Indeed Shimon's face and hands had a browner tone than when El'azar had seen him last. "I kind of like it," Shimon said, looking at the back of his hand. "Nothing quite lying in the sun's rays for hours on end."

"When you weren't catching the moon's rays," El'azar countered, trying desperately to find the upper hand.

"And by that you mean my wife secretly meeting at night with the Galilean to plot his escape?" Shimon asked. "Boy, she may have had me fooled for a nibble at the hook, but she has pulled you in with the hook right through your snout."

"I have no idea what you're on about," El'azar replied, "but it is probably another game to get out of my net. It won't work, Shimon. You will hand the pretender over to me right now."

"You were right on the nose, Shannah," he called over his shoulder. "I salute you."

"Hellooo El'azar," came the reply, hooting out of the sedan chair as her face and waving hand appeared. "Nice of you to come and get us out of this pickle."

In response to El'azar's gaping mouth, Shimon said "She somehow knew Qayaffa would try to double-cross the situation so he could get the Galilean all alone and never give him a chance to explain himself. So we decided we'd get up early in the morning and foil your plans."

"Except that you didn't, you idiot," El'azar spat in contempt. "He's right there. I can see him. And my men seem to be just a little stronger than your pitiful group."

"You can see him?" Shimon asked. "You must have excellent eyesight." Then turning around to look up the contours of the cliffs, he said "Where do you see him?"

"You think I can't make out a Galilean amid your little troop of chattel?" El'azar had had enough. He called out loudly and motioned the driver to lead him up the path. "Bring that man to me, the one in the blue and white."

Two of the *shomrim* dutifully took the designated man by both shoulders and forced him roughly down the path to meet

El'azar's advance. When they came together, El'azar looked eagerly down into the man's face, which did not seem to register even a hint of concern. "Well, Yeshueh of Natzrat, I am happy to finally make your acquaintance," El'azar purred.

The man's eyebrows shot up in question. "Me, Yeshueh?" he asked. "No one has ever called me that." He reached out a hand in greeting and said "I am Andreas ben Yona of Kfar Nahum. I am pleased to meet a man of such high rank and esteem among the *Yehudi*."

El'azar thought this too was a ruse: have the man lie about his name. He was just about to make the accusation when he heard a voluble guffaw coming from the sedan chair and intense sniggering coming from behind him. The litter swayed as Shoshannah laughed uncontrollably, snorting now and again to gain her breath. Behind him, Shimon was bent over at the waist, also having a hard time drawing enough breath to support his laughter. Reactions such as this were too honest, too visceral, too genuine to be faked. Even the Galilean had an impudent smirk flitting around his lips.

"You've been had, *chaver*," Shimon was finally able to say without laughing as he came up and laid a hand on El'azar's thigh. Looking up at the sun he said "I'd guess by this time Yeshueh of Natzrat and Miri his wife have finished a nice lunch at the inn on the highway to the city. She met us at the junction of the main highway and the road to Yericho, and we sent them together on their way up to Yerushalayim. They were so happy to see each other after having been apart for so long that we figured they deserved what privacy they could get on the road. They should arrive in the city before the tenth hour. Plenty of time to find their way to my father's home on Har HaZeitim and be squared away before sunset. But don't worry, I'm sure they will send word to Qayaffa that they have arrived safe and s..." but before he could finish his sentence, he was overcome by another fit of sniggering. El'azar could see tears in his eyes and was once more assaulted by the uncouth mirth of the man's wife.

"Would you like to join us on our journey?" came her raucous call from the litter. "We'd love the company."

Without saying a word, El'azar motioned to the driver to reverse course and waved off his servant who stood with the

shomrim. He tried to shut out the whoops of laughter rolling down the path to assault his ears, and was soon lost in a tirade of filthy curses shouting at him from within his own head.

Behind him, the *shomrim* backed away from the party, which quickly assembled with Shimon fairly leaping into his sedan seat, and the insolent imposter venting his laughter alongside the open curtain of the litter. "We must hurry," he heard Shimon's wife bellow, "We have but seven hours to reach home."

El'azar argued with himself whether he could ever show his face at home again. Perhaps he should just move into the winter palace and have done with it. But looking at the skin of his parched hands, he wondered how much lotion it would take to salve them, and his aching soul.

8 Sivan - He Will Command His Angels Concerning You

Psalms 91:11-12

Shueh turned to look back over the Kidron before entering the gate. He felt more at rest than he had in weeks. The climb up the road would have winded him even when he was in prime, but today, with a full lunch nestled in his belly and having drunk his fill, he felt full of life and energy.

The past two days had been slow burn of rest and quiet; filled with the joy of having Miri near, and only Miri. They had arrived an hour or so before sunset on Shavuot Eve at the family estate of Shimon high on the west side of *Har HaZeitim*, which had a beautiful view of the whole city of Yerushalayim. They were greeted by Gamaliel and Adinah, his wife. Although they were not expected, as soon as Shueh told them that Shimon and Shannah had invited them, they were welcomed as if they were family. Since Shueh had one more day of fasting to bring his total to the symbolic number of forty, they waited until after sunset to lay out a modest but tasty meal. A room was found for them at the back of a lovely garden.

Their walk from the Yordan river valley to the holy city had been strenuous enough that what little conversation they were able to have was necessarily brief and mundane. Shel had kept a dutiful distance behind them the entire way, allowing them privacy. But now that they were alone, still with one more day of fasting, they stayed up far into the night. At first Shueh listened eagerly to Miri's recitation of her meeting Shannah, and then of her long wait in Beth-Abara. But she soon tired of her own words and wanted to know of Shueh's adventures. He decided to save most of the story of the final evening at Secacah for a later time, as well as his initiation rite. He told her how he had fixed the kiln, of his own meetings with Shannah, and of course, learning to read. He had been busy tracing characters in the air when he found Miri had drifted off to sleep. He tenderly moved her into a comfortable position on the bed and covered her with ample bed clothes. It was far chillier on this hilltop high in the *Yehudi* hills than in the Yordan valley.

The next morning, they rose in the half-light before dawn to find a hearty breakfast laid out on the doorstep: yoghurt,

almonds, barley bread, goat's cheese, and pomegranate juice. When they met Shannah and Shimon, who were on their way down into the city for the festivities, Shannah thought it better that Shueh and Miri should wait an hour or so, and then come on their own into the city, taking a back way that led up the hill to Bethany and then down to the main highway. This way they would be lost in the crowd, keeping their identities shielded. Shel again followed at a discrete distance as they joined the throng, entered the city through the south gate, washed at the spring, and followed a piper up the way to the temple. They decided not to enter the temple mount but instead purchased a basket of grain and vegetables as their *Bikkurim* offering and begged another young couple to present it at the temple on their behalf. Then they browsed the shops and purchased a fine pair of fresh baked barley loaves to take back to Adinah as a gift.

That night as the sun descended over the reveling city, Adinah laid out their loaves along with a rack of lamb covered in garlic and mint, bowls of braised leeks, carrots, and turnips, and an unending supply of fine wine. They celebrated the end of Shueh's fast with many songs and raised glasses. Shueh found it hard to eat as much as he wanted to, but he nibbled on everything enough to please his hostess. Before long, they shooed Shueh and Miri out of the house to their room in the garden, where their long fast also ended. Shueh was glad he had not eaten too much.

The next day breakfast was taken late on a shaded and breezy porch a few hours after the sun rose. Shimon and Gamaliel were, of course, busy with business in the city, but Shannah chatted and giggled with them throughout breakfast. After they had eaten, they propped their elbows on a low wall and watched the masses moving up and down the streets in the city and swirling around the temple courtyards. It was then that Shannah had told them that Shueh, and Shueh alone, was wanted for an interview with the *Kohen HaGadol* after lunch the next day. That news clouded their joy for an hour but had soon been forgotten with lunch and conversation.

Now, on the day after Shavuot was done and the city was much quieter again, he stood at the gate alone waiting for his chaperones who trudged up the hill a little more slowly than he

had bounded up. Shel had been adamant that he needed to accompany his master to his interview. He had finally been convinced to stay behind only after the prohibitions against outlanders at the temple were made clear to him.

Gamaliel and Shimon, who made the trip on a regular basis, came up behind him, but seemed unfazed by the effort. Great trees lined the wandering course of the brook through which occasionally peeked whitewashed walls. On the heights of *Har HaZeitim* rambling orchards and vineyards followed the unruly contours of the hill. Homes, sheds, and mansions of various sizes and materials interspersed the trees and vines, becoming more orderly and expensive as the heights rose. He could still make out Gamaliel's rambling villa near the mount's crown beneath swaying palms and sycamores. Shueh sucked a deep breath of fresh air into his chest, feeling full of joyous life in the pleasant surroundings before he stepped into the gate into the close quarters, overpowering odors, and saturation of sound that was the hallmark of this ancient and holy city.

Shueh had never entered the city from this gate before. As a pilgrim to the great feasts, he had always entered at the main city gate on the south, bathing in the *Brechat HaShiloah* before ascending the temple mount. As Gamaliel led them through this entrance in the shadow of the northern wall of the temple mount, Shueh was surprised to see a newer part of the city, one that had not yet had time to become crammed with buildings. Immediately to the right were the colonnades of the *Beit Chesda* pools, but the buildings on the road leading away from it still had empty space between buildings. This was entirely different from the warren of buildings along the road from *Brechat HaShiloah*. Directly ahead rose up the towers of the *Baris*, the *Romim* garrison fortress. In the shadow of the angle between the *Baris* and the temple mount another gate pierced the wall leading to the holy precinct. But before they could go through that gate, Gamaliel and Shimon led him to the *Beit Chesda*, where an attendant eagerly awaited them to assist in their purification. Then, with clean head, hands, and feet, they took the few steps up to the *Tadi* gate.

The tunnel formed by the thick walls was breezy and comparatively dark, but it soon opened into the brilliant light of

the great open space of the *Har HaBayit*. Covered colonnades stretched out left, right, and down the length toward the south. He remembered this open space from both his childhood and more recent trips. It was odd to see it not completely crammed with pilgrims. A crew of priests in workman's garb were sweeping the leavings from the Shavuot festival into piles and bins, but the courtyard was otherwise empty. While Shueh noticed these details, what caught his full attention was the grandeur of the courtyard's centerpiece: the *Beit HaMikdash*. A wall higher than that surrounding the courtyard, rising behind a set of low barrier walls and pierced by various gates, was punctuated by square towers in groups of three. These walls were impressive enough, having been built by master masons a generation older than himself. Shueh could discern the fine craftsmanship and superior materials that would lead this building to long outlive its previous iterations.

But rising above it all, beyond the various courts that became progressively more holy, rose the soaring walls and faïence of the most holy place on earth, the temple itself. The ever-present plume of smoke from the *Mizbe'ach HaOlah* rose up, wrapping the building in a holy veil. In his mind's eye he could walk past the altar, up the stairs into the *Heichal*, past the *Menorah* with its seven lamps ever burning, the *Shulchan Lechem HaPanim* with its twelve loaves of bread made fresh every *Shabbat*, and the *Mizbach HaKetoret* where the priests lit the incense twice daily. These were well described by the priestly guides that accompanied groups of pilgrims into the courtyard on festival days. But the place beyond the *Mizbach*, where the ornate *Parochet* veiled the way, no one ever tried to describe. This was the *Kodesh HaKodashim*, holiest place on earth. It was only entered once a year during *Yom Kippur*, and only by the *Kohen HaGadol*. But even as Shueh bent his memory to recall the description of King Schlomo's sacred chamber with Moshe's ark and the outstretched wings of the *keruvim*, his inner eye showed him a different scene, one not described in holy writ, but somehow familiar to him. He saw a chamber with ornate walls and hangings, lit only by the lamp carried by the *Kohen HaGadol*. What it lit, however, was empty space. No ark, no *keruvim*, not even a standing stone. From the even pavement of

the floor there protruded the uneven contours of a flattened rock, upon which he saw the *Kohen HaGadol* place an ornamented shovel fashioned to look like a hand in cupping shape. The shovel held a mound of extravagantly expensive incense. Shueh searched for the source of this memory but was unable to remember having been told of the scene. Suddenly he felt the same warmth he had felt countless times before and instantly knew the source of the vision in his mind. He had been in this sacred chamber countless times to receive the *Kohen HaGadol's* offering, both when golden wings had graced the ark, and now in its mournful emptiness. In gratitude for this gift of revealed former memory, Shueh uttered "Thank you, Father" under his breath.

His eyes came back to the present to see Gamaliel holding the door of a chamber open for him. It was on the north wall of the arcade surrounding the temple, on its western end just below the soaring heights of the *Heichal*. "You are most welcome, my son, but as you enter, see that you do not go past the line on the floor."

Before entering, Shueh hesitated, knowing that the closer one approached the *Heichal*, the fewer people were allowed. "Are you certain I should enter?" he asked.

"This is the *Lishkat HaGazit*," Gamaliel explained as he led Shueh into the chamber. "The fact that it is called after the hewn stone of which it is made signifies that it is not as holy as the unhewn stones of the altar. Here is where the Sanhedrin meets, and not all of us are priests. Note the blue line halfway across the floor? Beyond that is technically within the *Heichal*, where only priests can go. We will soon be joined by the *Kohen HaGadol*, who will enter the chamber from the other end, because of his status."

Shueh breathed deeply trying to take in the magnificence of the room. The smells of burnt oil, incense, leather, stone, and wood filled his nostrils. Because of his work, he had often seen ornate mosaic floors, but above the floor level, he was unprepared for the lavish appointments. Graceful chairs stood in three ranks on each long wall, facing each other as each row rose slightly higher toward the wall. Dark and smooth wood lined the high walls over which were hung tapestries of the richest colors

displaying complex geometric patterns. The ceiling was of dark wood but cut in coffers that repeated a recurring floral motif. Just underneath the ceiling the high walls were pierced by several windows on the north wall, through which the afternoon sun sent rays of light in which danced a thousand motes of dust.

"This is the most beautiful room I have ever seen in my life," Shueh whispered. "And I've seen some pretty nice ones in *Romim* villas and temples."

"Oh, I've seen them as well," Shimon answered. "They are every bit as ornate, but in a foreign way that doesn't please a *Yehudi's* sensibilities. That is what you're experiencing, beauty as seen through the eyes not of the uncouth *Romim*, but of God's chosen people."

Shueh wasn't sure of the accuracy of Shimon's statement, but there was a kernel of truth somewhere in it, so he merely nodded his head in wondering agreement. But at that moment a rustle was heard from the other end of the room. A curtain was parted by an unseen hand, and the figure of the *Kohen HaGadol* was revealed. Shueh had half expected to see this personage arrayed in all the splendor of the bells, pomegranates, and precious stones, but was surprised to see a normal sized man arrayed in the normal white linen vestments of a priest under a capacious deep blue robe. As he walked down the aisle between the ranks of chairs toward them, Shueh noted the freshly combed beard, the immaculate hands, and the well-shod feet gliding in precise and measured steps along the floor. Barely noticed in the grandeur of his entrance was the shuffling wisp of a man in an overly large headdress who hurried to a seat behind the high priest.

He pulled up just short of the line on the floor, cocked his head just slightly to the left and raised his ample eyebrows in an expectant expression.

Gamaliel gestured toward him and said "Yeshueh, I present the *Kohen HaGadol*, Yousef ben Qayaffa *miBeit* Yehuda of Yerushalayim." Then gesturing toward Shueh he said "I give you Yeshueh ben Yousef *miBeit* Yehuda of Natzrat."

"I am pleased to finally meet you, Yeshueh," the high priest said as he extended a hand over the line. "Gamaliel tells me he has known of you for many years and gives you good report. I

look forward to getting to know you better. Please, take a seat," he said, motioning to the chairs on the first rank on Shueh's side of the line. Qayaffa crossed the line himself and sat across from him, spreading his arms out to use lay on the armrests of the chairs on either side and carefully crossing his ankles.

As Shueh slowly let himself down into a chair he regarded the high priest carefully. Qayaffa clearly thought himself to be in absolute command of the situation. He had crossed the line to condescend to his level, yet he carried his position and status with him like a cloud. The scent of perfume and freshly washed linens wafted across the aisle. He commanded three chairs, while Shueh crouched in a single seat. His chin was elevated, just the slightest bit, but enough to give the impression of superiority. He had spoken and would now wait until the mere peasant across from him begged a favor.

Suddenly Shueh was tempted to put him in his place. Did he have any idea who he was meeting? Should he try delving into Qayaffa's mind and revealing his inmost thought, to his belittlement and embarrassment? But no. How different this insipid voice was from the one that had opened his mind's eye while crossing the courtyard. While the temptation hinted at a delicious opportunity, it was as easy to swat away as a horsefly. But he would at least set things more on equal footing.

"I honestly wish I could say the same of you, *Ravvoni*," he said as politely as he could, marking a sharp intake of breath from Shimon, who sat one chair removed next to Shueh. "My knowledge of you is limited to the fact that you sought by devious means to compel my coming to you, and that in secret. While I would gladly have accepted an open invitation, I am compelled to doubt your good intentions under the present circumstances." Shueh saw Qayaffa's eyes narrow and his jaw clench ever so slightly. That was far enough. Now to offer salve for the wound he had just inflicted. "I hope that I am somehow mistaken and can be brought to see the grace and goodness of the house of Qayaffa."

"Impressive. Yes, well said my good man," Qayaffa said, purposefully modulating his voice into a soothing baritone. "We need not trifle with platitudes or small talk. Immediately into the arena. I hope you are in possession of a good team of horses?"

“I know little of circus racing,” Shueh admitted. “But I know that you feel entitled to the inner lane and its advantages, and I will not contest your position. But yes, I think my team to be equally yoked with yours.”

Qayaffa’s eyes twinkled with delight as he let out a controlled chuckle. “Many have thought themselves equally yoked with *ben* Qayaffa, but I think these long years of stability of rule under that hand show a certain advantage. I hope for your sake that you can at least keep up.”

With that, he stood up and beckoned to Shueh to join him. “Come, let us go out of this stuffy chamber and see the magnificent grounds of the temple.” Holding out an upraised hand toward Gamaliel and Shimon he said, “Do not worry. God willing, I will deliver him back to you in one piece.”

“God wills it,” Gamaliel warned through thinly stretched lips. He and Shimon both inclined their heads and stepped back to allow the *Kohen HaGadol* to pass. Shueh followed closely in his wake, shadowed by flitting shadow of the Qayaffa’s secretary. Waiting outside were a pair of intimidating *shomrim* who attached themselves to the small party, guarding it on either side.

They turned right and walked along the outer edge of the *Soreg*, the balustrades that fenced off the open court from the holy precinct. Qayaffa pointed to a plaque mounted on the fence. Shueh could tell that it was *Goy* writing, and he remembered what his father had told him the words meant, but he could not read the words in those strange letters.

“I am told that you have become literate in the recent past,” Qayaffa stated, trying to be nonchalant. “Are you able to read this?”

“It is a warning to foreigners not to go any further on pain of death,” Shueh repeated the words he remembered from childhood. “But no, I only learned the Hebraic script. I cannot read the *Goy* characters.”

“Reuben, would you read the notice to Yeshueh ben Yousef.” Turning to Shueh, he asked “I understand that you can at least understand the *Goyim*?”

Shueh nodded as the secretary dutifully stepped up to the inscription, adjusted his hat, cleared his throat, and read aloud

“Mithena allogeni eisporevesthai entos tou peri to ieron tryfaktou kai perivolou os d’ an lifthi eauto aitios estai dia to epakolouthein thanaton.”

Shueh bent to one knee before the inscription and traced the letters as the secretary recited. He was several moments later than Reuben on arriving at the end. His finger lingered on the last word, retracing the letters comprising the word.

“One would think that a great leader of men would be able to speak and read the tongues of all the people in his midst,” Qayaffa tutted at Shueh’s inability.

“*Nai, étsi tha skeftótan kaneís,*” Shueh agreed with Qayaffa in perfect *Goy* while still focused on the letters. “There are only twenty distinct characters here. I imagine there are others that are not needed in this notice, like the *zzz* sound. But why are there seven characters in the last word where in Hebrew we would use only four?”

Shueh saw Qayaffa’s eyebrows raised just the slightest bit in surprise, but quickly furrowed in a frown to cover it up. “Because those barbarians need help to know how to hold their mouth between sounds,” Qayaffa dismissed with a wave of his hand.

“I don’t know,” Shueh replied. “Here it seems the different open sounds helps the reader know that the notice means ‘will die’ instead of ‘is dead.’”

“You mean to tell me in this short span of time you are able to read the *Goy* letters? Qayaffa asked incredulously.

“No,” Shueh laughed, shaking his head. “I was only sounding out letters like a six-year-old *talmid*. But, as you can see, I could probably master it long before I might become a great leader.”

Qayaffa looked down him, barely able to contain his disgust to an extremely impertinent reply. But the high priest had not retained his seat for so long by playing a reactionary game. He was plotting moves much further down the *tabula*. “Since we are good *Yehudi*,” he breezily pronounced, “Let us enter the outer court at least.”

They stepped under the archway and up the few steps to the court that was far as women and children could advance. Memories of previous visits descended on him like a warm

blanket. It was at the steps of the Nicanor gate, at the west end of the inner courtyard, that he had first witnessed the slaughter of the sacrificial animals with his mother and siblings. He had entered this court several other times on subsequent visits, and just six weeks ago, although it seemed like years, he and Miri had observed the *Pasha* from the arcade of Solomon's Porch just behind him. But on this day, although he could spy through the Nicanor gate a cadre of priests polishing the altar after its heavy use during *Shavuot*, the courtyard seemed to be deserted. Shueh wondered whether this was coincidental, or whether the high priest had arranged for a private interview.

Qayaffa was leading Shueh toward the steps leading up to the Nicanor gate. Shueh had never been up the steps; he had always found it too crowded in the court beyond. But now that it was empty, they could walk right up to the barrier that separated it from the court of the priests to get a good view of the altar, the basin, and the myriad tables, hooks, and knives used in preparing the sacrificial beasts. For having been in heavy use until the previous day, Shueh was impressed with how clean and orderly everything appeared today.

Rising above it all was the polished marble face of *Heichal* itself, with its two sets of gilded pillars flanking the bronzed doors. It was disorienting looking at it from this direction. His mind's eye remembered seeing those doors from the other end of the *Heichal*, through the veil, past the tables of holy bread and the *Menorah* to the inside of the brass doors.

"Being a priest, I am permitted to walk past this barrier, up the final steps, and into the very *Heichal* itself," Qayaffa said matter of factly. "Are you prepared to do so?"

"Were the people to proclaim me *Mashiach*, even you couldn't stop me," Shueh replied in an equally flat tone.

"I don't see anyone here today making that proclamation," Qayaffa said, looking around with upturned hands.

"Besides these busy priests, I don't see anyone here today at all," Shueh responded. "Certainly, the *Kohen HaGadol* has the power to close the precinct gates on occasion. I'm guessing this morning is one of those occasions? I mean, in case I call down fire from heaven, you certainly don't want anyone to witness it,"

he said. Then gesturing to the priests working in the court before them, “at least not any who are not under your control.”

“Some might be grateful for a private tour,” Qayaffa scolded.

“A private tour would indeed be worth expressing gratitude for,” Shueh shot back. “But a secret one, I’m not so sure about that.” Shueh turned to lead the way back down the stairs of the Nicanor gate, almost bumping into the secretary one the way. “Why all the secrecy, Reuben?” Shueh asked him. “What do you suppose he afraid of?”

Reuben’s eyelids flew open in surprise as his eyes darted back and forth between his master and Shueh in confusion. Should he answer? A slow nod from Qayaffa gave him leave to speak. “The *Kohen HaGadol* is afraid of nothing,” he prefaced his reply hastily. “What he fears is on account of the people. The *Romim* have become benevolent as of late. The *Pax Romanus* is making everyone’s life easier and better. If the riff-raff are allowed to rise behind another pretended *Mashiach*, who knows what the *Romim* will do?”

“I imagine your life has become fairly easy since you attached yourself to the house of Qayaffa,” Shueh agreed with Reuben. “But I wonder whether others outside his house, outside this city, are of the same opinion?”

“Whether they believe it or not,” Reuben shot back, “it is the truth. They are simply jealous of what they don’t have, the ungrateful lot. And instead of working harder to improve their situation, they hide behind the myth of some hero who will lead them to coming out on top. The sad truth is, most of them who rally around some pretender just end up dead, or worse.”

“Is there something worse than death,” Shueh asked.

“Being nailed to a tree,” Reuben hissed. “Those that Pilatus puts pins in; death can’t come soon enough for them.”

A visceral reaction flooded Shueh’s body. His feet seemed to burn with fire and his knees threatened to collapse as he imagined such torture. God willing such a fate would not befall him. “You speak the truth, Reuben,” he managed to say, mastering his body’s empathetic response. “But don’t you think the real *Mashiach* would be able to master the *Romim*?”

They had descended the stairs and exited out the south gates and were passing into the wide courtyard that led up to the massive portico that lined the entire southern wall. It was here his parents had found him after he had spent three glorious days of school with Yoni when they were both eleven.

“The real *Mashiach*?” Reuben snorted. “There is no such thing; it is simply a fantasy. Show me once, just once, where he is mentioned in all of holy writ.”

“The Sons of Light and the *Perushim* can...” Shueh began. Just as quickly Reuben opened his mouth to refute what he already knew would be said. But they were both cut off by a loud cough from Qayaffa.

“Brothers, brothers,” he chided. “Come here any given *Shabbat* and you can hear men more learned than you both discussing that very question for hours on the steps of this portico. And like them, you’ll never come to the end of the discussion.” He led them up the steps and turned left, walking in the shade of the many-pillared arcade toward a great doorway at the very end of the passage. “Reuben is right, Yeshueh ben Yousef. How many have there been who have tried to claim the dubious title? And where have they all ended up?”

With that, he turned to Reuben and one of the *shomrim* and bade them stay positioned at the doorway. He motioned to Shueh to enter the door and ascend the stairway that spiraled up from the floor. As he ascended, he marveled at the craftsmanship that consistently formed each step from a single great block of stone, its narrow end fitting to form a column at the center of the stairs, and its much wider end helping to form the wall that encircles and supported the staircase. It took two full turns around a circuit until an exit appeared at the top, leading out onto a narrow balcony. The balcony was roofed over and fenced in by balustrades and columns. Shueh first looked down over the path they had come across the courtyard to the walled precinct surrounding the *Heichal*. He was standing as high as the crenelations of its roof. He felt his knees go a little weak looking down from that height. But then he noticed Qayaffa looking out over the eastern wall. From his pocket he had produced a hen’s egg and was rolling it back and forth in his hand. He beckoned to Shueh to join him. Shueh dared not look down, but kept his gaze

riveted on the heights of *Har HaZeitim* across the Kidron, now only slightly higher than he was. But Qayaffa waggled the egg before his eyes, and then deftly flicked it out into the open space on the other side of the balustrade. Shueh unwillingly riveted his eyes on the rapidly disappearing orb. He felt his heart beat three times before he saw it spatter violently on the rocks below. A heartbeat later and the smack of the crushed egg hit his ear. Shueh felt a sickening feeling rising from his bowels, and wrenched himself away to look back at Qayaffa.

“A reasonable man could turn and walk back down those stairs, find his way back to his wife and take her back to the Galil,” Qayaffa said in a warm, inviting tone. “And as a gift from a grateful city, he might do so with some assistance.” He produced a handful of silver coins from another pocket. But then his voice turned icy cold. “Or he could be unreasonable and pursue the claim foisted upon him by his *shequl* cousin. And seeing how that choice will eventually lead to his untimely death, along with thousands of his supporters, is it not better he should die before compelling his whole nation to perish with him?”

Shueh saw Qayaffa pushing the coins toward him, trying to get him to relent, take the payment, and disappear. He also saw the *shomer* pull a cudgel from his waist in preparation of forcing Shueh’s exit over the balustrade. For a moment he was almost overcome by the fear of being thrown like an egg from the this pinnacle, and the thought of taking a substantial payment and disappearing from sight was an incredible temptation.

But before he could even try to master his will in the face of fear, Qayaffa raised his palm to *shomer*, halting his advance. However, he also pocketed the coins. “Your cousin not only makes the claim that you are *Mashiach*, but you yourself claim something far and above beyond that. Is that not true?”

Shueh inclined his head, beginning to remember who he was and what he could do. “It is true, as you have heard,” he modestly replied.

“Well, I’ll tell you one thing that *is* written in the holy scripture. Did not the Psalmist write, *For he will give his angels charge over you, to guard you in all your ways. They will bear you up on their hands: lest you dash your foot against a stone?* If

you are God's chosen, and indeed, his very Son, then what is the risk of going over the wall?" He stepped back up to the balustrade and tossed a single silver coin into the air. It rang sharply as it bounced off the rock and caromed off toward a group of people on the road. "Just think, instead of seeing your body explode in a mass of blood and bones, those people down there could see you could lightly sail down in a flurry of robes, gently touch down on the rocks. They would be more than happy to lead you back in the city walls to acclaim you and your new kingdom." He patted the thin wall of the balustrade. "Just step up here, my friend. Right in front of the *Kohen HaGadol*, make your divine presence known to your waiting people. Go ahead, just do it."

Fear began to master him. He felt as if every particle of matter was being sucked from inside him. He placed his hand on the stones Qayaffa was patting. They felt cold and unyielding, like the rock that would crush him at the bottom of his fall. The cold seemed to jump up his arm from the stones, and he was again shivering uncontrollably. A thought came unbidden to his mind that if he could convince this unbelieving *Kohen HaGadol* of his power and calling, here was a man who could instantly turn the entire *benei Yisrael* to him. Yes, it wouldn't hurt to have a small crowd of people to witness and testify of his miraculous flight down from the pinnacle, but to have this mighty man instantly made a believer! How easy it would be for him to fulfill his mission. Perhaps he should do just that, step up on the balustrade and cast himself down.

He made a move toward the wall, when his eye met the gaze of the *shomer* standing next to Qayaffa. The soldier's face was a mask of fear and pain. His chin was drawn almost imperceptibly into his breast and his shoulders cringed. The slightest shake of his head and pleading eyes conveyed a message that Shueh's thoughts interpreted as the remembered words of his friend: *not here, not this way, not now, not for this man*.

Shueh noted the shivering and coldness. He had forgotten how it had afflicted him when Tzuri had challenged him to turn stone into bread. As he began to fortify himself internally, he felt the warmth well up in his breast. It drove away the fearful emptiness from within him as it swiftly ran along his limbs and

filled his head. Remembering his earlier ordeal with Tzuri, he wondered what words would emerge from his mouth to chastise Qayaffa. When none came, he was a bit confused. All he could see in his mind's eye was the coin Qayaffa had cast over the parapet. He looked down and saw a group of children searching for the coin. Then he knew what to say.

He called out in a loud voice "To your left, under that bush there." A teenage girl heard him, looked up and followed where Shueh's hand was pointing, and then rushed over to the bush. A few seconds of searching suddenly yielded to a cry of triumph as she held up the glittering coin and waved back at Shueh. A little puff of joy filled his heart at seeing her happiness. With this joy in his heart, he suddenly found the words he should say to Qayaffa. "It is also written, by Moshe himself, that thou shalt not tempt the Lord Adonai."

"Am I tempting anyone, much less the Lord Adoni? Qayaffa said innocently. Then, with the same hand that had stopped the *shomer* from advancing, he gave a flick of his wrist to command him to advance and finish the deed.

Shueh saw the man's reluctance even as he advanced to execute his master's order. He caught the soldier's forearm in his hand as he tried to force him over the parapet. "*Chaver*," he soothed. "How many have you sent to their awful death over this wall? Do their screams haunt your dreams? Do the bursting brains and bowels blot out your sight? Is this what you really want to do?"

The force went out of the man's arm, although it was still raised against him. Shueh could see the reality of the situation replace the blank soldier's stare. An almost imperceptible shake of his head let Shueh know he was not in danger. Shueh whispered quickly and quietly in the soldier's ear "The *Kohen HaGadol* will have your head for not obeying orders. Come, follow me to the Galil. I can find you honest and peaceful work there."

Then, before Qayaffa could react to his soldier's insubordination, Shueh reached into the fold where Qayaffa had pocketed the coins. Grabbing a handful of them, he threw them out over the balustrade that looked out south, over the City of Dawid with its bustling traffic. "Behold, the grace of his

eminence, the *Kohen HaGadol*.” Several people let out a cheer when they saw the shower of coins descending on them, and then quickly scuttled to be the first to capture one of them. Qayaffa had no choice but to raise a hand and acknowledge their cheers. During that moment, Shueh took the *shomer* by the hand and fled down the stairway. They left Reuben and the other *shomer* gaping by the doorway and ran pell-mell back to the room where Gamaliel and Shimon awaited his return. Offering no explanations to their sputtering questions, he led all three of them back toward the *Tadi* gate. He turned and looked back up to the temple’s pinnacle where the *Kohen HaGadol* stood on the rampart. He knew they would meet again. Before Reuben and the other *shomer* could reach them, they ducked into the tunnel, turned down the path, and fled through the city gates, disappearing into the crowds walking along the Kidron Valley.

9 Sivan - And Him Only Shalt Thou Serve Deut 6:13

It had turned out the *shomer* who had first threatened Shueh on the pinnacle, and then fled with him through the city wall, named Hizqiyyahu, had a wife named Rahel and a little girl of the same name. As soon as Shel saw them coming panting up the hill, he had been frantic to assist in some way. When Shueh told him Hizqiyyahu's family might be in danger, Shel had taken matters in his own hand and disappeared back down the hill with the poor soldier in tow. Not two hours later the little family had been ensconced in the guest quarters of one of Gamaliel's friendly neighbors.

Shueh had expected that when Shannah heard the story of Qayaffa's murderous attempt, she would become livid and lash out in some way. But he found he had much to learn about this woman. She had instead sat quietly for some time with an inwardly turned eye, shaking her head and occasionally muttering to herself. Finally, she had heaved a huge sigh, heaved herself up and billowed to the neighbor's home. She had returned an hour or so later with a pleasant smile on her face and a report that the former *shomer*'s family would be relocating to Yaffa, where Rahel had a favorite cousin. Hizqiyyahu, or Hezy as called him, was excited about learning the trade of his in-laws, something to do with boats or ships, which he would be enabled to do thanks to a little something Shannah had given them. When Shimon had opened his mouth to question how much a little something amounted to, she shook her head primly and said "Just enough, and perhaps just a little more."

Shueh and Miri had observed these events as spectators at a play, sitting quietly in a corner of the open courtyard. Shueh had at first related Qayaffa's words and actions, after which he had retired to his seat with Miri. Shimon had practically exploded at Qayaffa's affrontery, wondering aloud how the high priest himself could so thoroughly reject the idea of *Mashiach*. Gamaliel had taken a quieter tone due to his long-practiced leadership of the Sanhedrin, but Shueh could tell he was no less angry. There was, of course, nothing they could do, Gamaliel had explained. An appeal to Pilatus would end in nothing but the governor's amusement by playing off the two warring parties

into wasting their energy on something that was no concern of his. But he would keep the knowledge of this attempt and humiliating defeat for use as a bargaining chip in the future.

As the commotion began to die down, Miri excused herself to help Adinah and Shannah with preparations for *Shabbat*. Shueh remained, replaying the scene in his head. It was not that he second-guessed anything he had said or done. It all seemed to fit the circumstances, and there were no regrets of having said or done anything amiss. But he wondered at how Qayaffa had chosen to come to his ultimatum. He compared it with the challenge Tzuri had issued him just four days prior.

Tzuri had said *If you are the son of God*, while Qayaffa's words were *If you are God's chosen, and indeed, his very Son*. Why did these two otherwise unrelated men tempt him with the same challenge? Why did they call into question his very identity? Had this not been overwhelmingly confirmed to him in the waters of Yordan? Was there some nefarious power linking these two men and their provocations?

His mind began to search his memory of scripture. There was Iyov's *HaSatan* who supposedly presented himself before Adonai to question Iyov's integrity, but Shueh had thought this a literary device, and not a person. Zekharyahu wrote of another *HaSatan* accusing the *Kohen HaGadol*, but Shueh had understood this simply to be figurative of the law. In another instance, another *HaSatan* rose up against Dawid inciting him to take a census of *biet Yisrael*, the curse from which still prohibited *ravvi* from counting anything. Shueh had laughed to himself about the elders avoiding the evil eye by completely transparent attempts at not actually counting, but had not thought much about *HaSatan* rising up against anyone.

But then his mind was caught up to Yeshayahu's account of someone falling from heaven, someone who wanted to be exalted above the stars of God. He had only heard the text once, and he thought the *rav* had pronounced the person's name as *HaYell*, which he had taken as The Boaster, or even The Howler. But perhaps the *rav* had read the word incorrectly (he knew how easy that would have been now that he could read), and the name might have been *Haylel*, or a shining one. Who was this person? Why did he seek to make the world a wilderness? Was this the

serpent who had tempted Ava in the garden? Was there actually a living thing, like the thing he felt inside himself, that lived outside of any one body, who had survived thousands of years since Ava and still tried to ruin mankind? Was this where man's evil nature came from? Was it he that whispered into both Tzuri's and Qayaffa's ear to test his belief in himself?

But even as he had struggled with this concept, he had been interrupted by the call for *Shabbat* dinner. The solemnity of the occasion, followed by the merriment that comes from good wine and good company had totally put the thought out of his mind. Until now.

He found himself alone with Gamaliel. It was *Shabbat* afternoon. They had walked a short distance from his home to the summit of *Har HaTzofim*, a place that was kept clear of homes or memorials or even trees. The view was stupendous. Shueh imagined on a clear day one could see all the way from the Salt Sea in the south to Gennesaret in the north, and from Yordan in the east to Yam Gadol in the west. Today the view was blocked by scattered clouds to the west and north.

Gamaliel confirmed his guess about the view. "On a clear day you can see all the way to the south of the Galil," he said as he beckoned in that direction. "Or as Yeshayahu called it, *Galil HaGoyim*."

"That term confuses me," Shueh admitted. "The word *Goyim* just means 'the nations,' or anyone who is not *beit Yisrael*, but it seems to have settled mostly on the heirs of Aleksander and those who speak his tongue. I mean, technically the *Romim* are *Goyim*: foreigners. But to think of them as the same people is ludicrous."

"I suppose that's what comes of having such an ancient tongue, and one that is not adept at coming up with new words that aren't already part of our canon," Gamaliel explained. "But the Galil is such a distant and strange region of *eretz Yisrael*. There is a streak of rebelliousness that runs deep in anyone born there. I think the fish in Gennesaret must teem with some strange juice that infects the entire region."

“Tell me about it,” Shueh laughed. “Is not every other woman in the Galil called Miri.” He slightly mispronounced the name, making it sound exactly like the word for rebellion.

“Your Miri warned me you were a punster,” Gamaliel rolled his eyes. “I thought my title and bearing might keep me safe from such low humor.” He chuckled to himself, enjoying the joke the more he thought of it. “But I was referring to Yeshayahu for a different reason.”

“Ah yes,” Shueh sighed. “*The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; they that dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.* A passage that sparked some of my own premonitions.”

“I imagine Yehuda bounced the same idea about his head,” said Gamaliel, “before he finally got up the nerve to come out in open rebellion against the *Romim*.”

“You mean Yehuda ben Hizqiyyahu of Gamala?” Shueh asked. “He’s a local legend where I grew up, but I did not know he claimed to be *Mashiach*.”

“What do you know of him?” Gamaliel asked.

“Just what my abia told me when I was a boy,” Shueh answered, thinking back to when he was about six. “He came rushing home from where he was working in Zippori and said he would not be able to go back to work for several weeks. A man named Yehuda had broken into the weapon keep in the royal palace there. He armed his followers, and they holed up in the city for a while. I never knew why he did it, or really what became of him. All I remember is that my friends and I used to play sword games where Yehuda was the ultimate hero.”

Gamaliel laughed ruefully. “Isn’t that the way of it?” he asked. The true story is seldom known; only the legend survives.”

“What is the rest of the story?” Shueh asked, sincerely wanting to know.

“Yehuda’s father was a brigand living the eastern slopes above Gennesaret. He and his band menaced commerce coming down from Tzidon, Berut, and Demesek. Before Herodos was known as HaGadol, he was given responsibility for the Galil, and the first thing he did was to round up Hizqiyyahu and lynch him

on the hillside. Needless to say, Herodos scored many points with both the *Romim* and the *Syrianim*, but not with us.”

“*Us* being...?” Shueh prompted.

“With Yerushalayim, with the people in general,” Gamaliel waved his hands about, appearing flustered that he had to explain such an obvious thing.

“And with the Sanhedrin?” Shueh added helpfully, trying to pin down the real source of the opposition.

“Yes,” Gamaliel looked at Shueh through his eyebrows, “if it must be known, my father, who was president of the Sanhedrin in those days. The brigand should have been tried before them, and they should have been the body to condemn and execute him. And when the Sanhedrin rightfully called for Herodos to be judged for his crime, he arrived at his tribunal not as a man, but as a warlord, bringing his own brigands with him. It was a circus, and it was the final act in the struggle of the *Yehudi* to rule over themselves.”

“How is that, exactly?” Shueh asked eagerly. Here was his chance to understand history from someone who knew it intimately. He had grown up under nominal *Herodi'im* rule under a *Romim* overseership. He wasn't sure if that was good, bad, or just the way it was. People had always griped about Herodos and the *Romim*, but they also griped about the weather, taxes, sheep, goats, and anything else they couldn't absolutely control.

“Before Herodos we had our own kings, the descendants of the righteous the *Maqabi* who threw off the blasphemous yoke of the *Goyim* who polluted the temple. The *Hashmona'im* were not always the best rulers, but they were ours, and we were theirs. But then two princes fought over the kingdom and brought *Rom* to help settle their argument, But instead of settling the argument, the *Romim* general Pompey came in and took over. He relegated one of the princes to be Kohen HaGadol, but established the land of Yehuda as a *Romim* province. It was bad enough having Pompey walk brazenly through the temple, but his successor, Kaiser, made Herodos' father, who was an *Edomim*, the new governor of the Yehuda. From Yehudi self-rule to *Romim* overseership under a son of Esav in a single generation. But at least Herodos' father was a son of Noach. And

the Sanhedrin were allowed to govern all but the financial affairs of the land.”

“But Herodos *HaGadol*’s treatment of the Sanhedrin during his trial put an end to that, I’m assuming,” Shueh asked.

“Yes, to make a long story short, we were allowed to go puttering about the garden with traditional Yehudi law, but anything having to do with capital crime was removed from our purview. We became mere figureheads.”

“I understand better your dislike of *Rom* and the Tetrarchy,” Shueh said looking down at the city below him, “but what has this all got to do with Yehuda of Gamala?”

They both turned to look back north toward the Galil currently invisible behind clouds. Gamaliel continued his history lesson. “Yehuda grew up with hatred of both the *Romim* and the *Herodi'im*. It festered in him for fifty years. When Augustus ordered that the province of Yehudi be taxed just like any other province, the new governor Cyrenius ordered a census be taken to determine property values and tax levies. The Yehudi pay their annual half-shekel to the temple, but that is already two days’ wages for most people. But now, who knew how much the *Romim* would extract. It was all too much for Yehuda. He raised a cry among the people, equating taxation with slavery. He said that if the people didn’t stand up for themselves, God would no longer stand up for them. One thing led to another until he ended up raiding the *Romim* weapons-keep and arming his followers. It was they who proclaimed him *Mashiach*, the deliverer from oppression by both blasphemers and infidels. I mean, where before they had been good *Perushim*, keeping to the right side of the law, now they stepped beyond the right all the way over to the wall of extremism. ‘We must think about *eretz Yisrael* first. We must become great once more, or God is not with us,’ they cried.”

Shueh fancied he could hear raging crowds chanting in zealous fervor. Turning to Gamaliel, he said “I assume that you were opposed to Yehuda. You and the Sanhedrin with you?”

“Lawlessness is of course not to be tolerated,” Gamaliel said, a little too forcibly Shueh thought.

“But you sympathized with his aims,” he prodded lightly.

“I had no argument with Yehuda,” Gamaliel admitted. “It was the man who perched on his shoulder and whispered in his ear: Tzadduk. Yehuda was doing just fine with stirring up the people. Perhaps given a little more time and better direction, he could have had a salutary effect on Cyrenius’ taxes. But it was Tzadduk who moved him to open, armed rebellion. *Rom* can put up with shouting peasants, but as soon as they get swords, you can bet the gloves come off. Yehuda and his crowd were smashed under a *Romim* legion.”

“I don’t know that we ever heard that part as boys,” Shueh chuckled. “It doesn’t play to well when one is trying to be king of the hill.”

“But I am telling you now, Yeshueh ben Yousef,” Gamaliel turned to Shueh with what appeared to be desperation in his wide eyes. “Now is our chance, and if you don’t squander it, we could come out on top.”

Shueh was confused. What exactly was Gamaliel proposing? He shook his head and held out open, upturned hands.

“You tried listening to your cousin and his claim of your divinity,” Gamaliel erupted. “Where did that lead you? To Secacah, that warren of self-righteous, would-be usurpers of the temple rite. What did they want from you? I’m not sure, but it appears you got out of there with not much more than your life. Then you fled here to the presence of the real temple authority. And what did you get from that? You were nearly thrown from the pinnacle of the temple, again just barely escaping with your life. And now? Now you have been led to me.” Gamaliel paused, panting a little in his excitement.

“And just what do you propose?” Shueh asked.

“That you listen to me, and to me alone,” Gamaliel replied, beginning to breathe even faster. “I am the presiding officer of the Sanhedrin, the only truly sovereign voice of *beit Yisrael*. I know what to do. I mean, look!” he exclaimed, pointing down to the temple mount beneath them. “I already know how to bring down the *Kohen HaGadol* after what he tried to do to you. And look!” he exclaimed again, turning swing his arm in a wide arch to the north and east. “I am the chief *Perush*, the grandson of Hillel *HaSava*. Do you not think the *Perushim* of all Galil of the Nations will not flock to you under my leadership?”

Shueh began to get caught up in Gamaliel's vision. He felt a chill like a breeze begin to envelop him.

"Do not listen to your cousin and his wild vision of divinity he has foisted on you. You want to be divine? Most people wait until after they die before claiming that title. But at least wait until you are on the throne. Don't listen to whatever Menachem tried to whisper in your ear. Do not fear the threats of Qayaffa. Even Pilatus can be handled appropriately. I can deliver all of *eretz Yisrael* into your hands, Yeshueh. But you must listen to me, and me alone. If the people see a *Mashiach* who is subservient to the *Nasi*, what more convincing will they need?"

But Shueh was not listening; not really. He heard the words and understood, but he was concentrating on what was going on within him. The chill breeze was making him shiver.

"I know you do not know what to do, Yeshueh," Gamaliel went on trying to convince him. "You feel driven by prophesy and signs to stand up and be counted as *Mashiach*, but you don't have any idea of what that entails. I do. Just listen to me and I will do just that."

The shivering was growing, but Shueh did not succumb to the fear or the delusions of grandeur that had accompanied this discomfort. He now recognized what it was, and moreover, where it came from. Who it came from. "*Zil l'achorai, Satana*," he spat in an angry whisper.

"No, you misunderstand, Yeshueh," Gamaliel blurted. "I am your advocate, not your adversary. I will get behind you, but as your ally."

"You will excuse me," Shueh bowed his head to Gamaliel. "I was not talking to you, but to someone else."

Gamaliel took a quick glance all about him. "But there is no one here but us," he explained.

"There was one here," Shueh explained. "But he was unseen while here, and has now fled." As Gamaliel's expression grew more perplexed, Shueh reached out and took his hand, clasping it above and below with both his hands. "*Chaver*, is it not written *Thou shalt fear Adonai thy God; and Him shalt thou serve, and by His name shalt thou swear*. I cannot bow the knee to you, even temporarily. I am truly sorry, *rav Nasi*. I know you are of

good heart and a good man, but I cannot follow you. I must listen only to my Father.”

Shueh watched the old man’s expression fall and his whole frame slump. But even as he did a gleam came back into his eye, and he looked sidelong at Shueh. “Did I really say all that?” he asked himself. “I can’t believe I said all that. I mean, yes, it is a dream of mine, but never in my right mind would I come out and say it like that.”

“And you weren’t in your right mind,” Shueh said helpfully as he started out down the hill. “How did you feel while you were reciting your plans?”

“How did I feel?” Gamaliel asked in confusion. “I felt...well, come to think of it, I felt like something came over me. Truth to tell, I felt as if thoughts were flying into my head and being ripped out of my tongue. I mean, I got myself all heated up badmouthing people, but then something else took over. What was that? Am I going mad or something?”

“Well, where I come from people would say that you had a *sheda*, but I’m inclined to believe those people just have a sickness of the brain or heart. You, on the other hand, definitely had a *sheda*. I would go so far as to say that the Prince of the Sanhedrin had the very Prince of the *Sheddim* perched on his shoulder and whispering in his ear.”

“A devil!” Gamaliel exclaimed. “How on earth? How do you know?”

“It seems each of us experience it differently,” Shueh explained as they turned onto the road that led to Gamaliel’s home. “With me it is cold and shivering. With you it appears to be overpowering thoughts. But however we experience them, the source is the same as put into Ava’s heart the desire for the tree.”

“The serpent?” Gamaliel whispered loudly. “The same one? Well, I have never heard this before, but I can find no reason to refute you. Gracious God, how do I avoid this in the future?”

“First of all, stop badmouthing people,” Shueh laughed. “But if you feel constrained to say things out loud you have only thought of before, or indeed have never entered your head before, grab your jaw with both hands and run somewhere where no one can hear you.”

They walked in silence for a few minutes. Gamaliel waved to a couple of neighbors, saying the obligatory *Shabta Tava*.

"We will speak of this to no one," Gamaliel whispered as they approached his own front door. "Is that right?"

"I will tell no one that you had a *sheda*," Shueh laughed, "If you don't tell anyone that I spent the whole time punning."

"But you didn't," Gamaliel frowned.

"See, exactly as I said," Shueh concluded. They walked into his home arm in arm wondering aloud how much longer it would be until dinner.

Chapter 9

Author's Notes

There are two routes carrying foot traffic between Galilee and Jerusalem. Perhaps the most traveled was the Jordan River valley. This route was mostly level for the first three days descending from Galilee and only mounted precipitously for the final day's journey up into the Judean Hills and Jerusalem. This route was also preferable because it avoided contact with the Samaritans, a group of Israelites who were left in the land at the time of the Babylonian conquest in 587 BCE. But, as witnessed by the account of the Woman at the Well in the Gospel of John, people also traveled the more direct route leading over the hills and into the steep valleys leading directly north from Jerusalem.

One of the towns along this route was Shiloh. According to the Biblical account, after completing the conquest of Canaan, Joshua sought out a place central to the newly conquered land to place the Tabernacle. He chose Shiloh, some 25 miles north of Jerusalem. The Ark of the Covenant abode there until the time of the prophet Samuel, when invading Philistines desecrated the site and captured the Ark of the Covenant. This meant that Shiloh would have been the religious center of Israel for around 350 years. One can imagine that during these centuries the original Tabernacle would have deteriorated and have to have been replaced many times over. Indeed, recent archaeological excavations conducted by Scott Stripling have unearthed many tantalizing hints about the Tabernacle, or *mishkan*, as the Jews call it. He has even unearthed tiny ornaments looking just like pomegranates, just like those described in Exodus. Combining his own discoveries with his predecessors, he has concluded that the Tabernacle might have been located at multiple locations on the little hill of Shiloh, and that it might even have been replaced by a stone structure.

Just like is mentioned several times in the Gospels, the exact day and hour were not known in advance by the bride, as this was a decision made solely by the groom's father, who would determine when the couple's new home was ready.

10 Sivan - Your People Will Be My People and Your God My God

Ruth 1:16

They had left Gamaliel's home long before daybreak the next day. By leaving early, not only would they miss the press of traffic that came into the city each morning, but if Qayaffa had any spies set out to waylay them, they would probably not be at their posts yet.

The journey to Shiloh was long and strenuous. The first two hours was mostly downhill until they rested under some trees at the bottom of a *wadi*. Shel, being inquisitive, had found out from a local that this was the same *wadi* that came out of the hills by Yericho. "Follow this watercourse long enough," he said to Shueh, "and you will find the place where we first met."

"I like this end of the *wadi* much better than that one," Shueh said. "You're alive and carrying more than half the baggage."

They were traveling light. No bedrolls or blankets were necessary. Shannah had pressed enough coins into Miri's hands and whispered the names of tavern keepers with a good reputation. "What good is it having money and knowing people if you don't share," she had giggled. All they now carried were enough water skins to make it from spring to spring, and a change of clothes in case of accident. Shel had redistributed loads so that Shueh and Miri carried only their own water skin.

After climbing the steep path that led out of the *wadi*, they found a small village where they purchased some fruit, nuts, and a cup of wine which they shared among them. Then it was another plunge into another *wadi*, followed by a climb that seemed every bit as long as the descent from Yerushalayim. The village atop this hill was a pilgrimage site: Beth-El. Tradition held that it was here where Yakov propped his head up on a rock and dreamt of angels ascending and descending. There was even a small enclosure built around a small standing stone that claimed to be the original stone. For a small fee one could touch it. The trio decided to look at it over the fence and move on to find lunch in the tavern Shannah had recommended.

Two hours after leaving Beth-El they found themselves in a deeply cloven valley with towns looking down from three sides. Shel assured them that, according to his conversations at the

tavern, this was the beginning of the final uphill climb to their goal for the night: Shiloh. As usual, there were always ups and downs while walking these hills, but at least there were no more deep *wadis*. Two hours before sunset the little town of Shiloh came into view. Shueh asked Shel to precede them up the hill into town and to arrange lodging at Shannah's preferred tavern. He was going to stay and explore this ancient holy site with Miri for an hour or so.

"But if the town is up there, why are we down here?" asked Miri. "Wouldn't the *mishkan* have been up there?"

"Remember that Yeshueh, Shmuel, and Khannah lived more than a thousand years ago," Shueh explained. "Things tend to move around. After Shlomo built the *Heichal* in Yerushalayim, this place lost its reason for existence. It was more than likely abandoned after a while, and when new people moved in, the existing buildings were pretty shabby. It was easier to harvest the stones from these buildings to set up totally new ones up on the higher hill."

"That makes sense," Miri agreed as they poked among some ruined foundations that barely rose above the surrounding dust. "I'd rather set up my own house the way I like it than try to fix up an old place."

Shueh looked around from the rise on which they stood. There was no clear place that stood out identifying where the *mishkan* had once stood. He imagined it would be a large, flat area, but the only candidate for that was far down on the south side of the hill. Indeed, there was an enclosure there much like the one that housed the standing stone at Beth-El where pilgrims could pay a fee and walk about the cleared space. But why build there? He decided that it really didn't matter where the actual site was. Their proximity to the place where the actual *Aron HaBrit* with its winged *keruvim* had stood for hundreds of years was close enough for him.

He found the remnants of a wall that was flat enough to sit upon. After dusting it off, he invited Miri to sit while he stood before her. "I have told you about my initiation experience in Secacah," he reminded her.

“Yes, where the men dressed up like animals, made you promise things and then made you bleed,” she said while wrinkling her nose.

“Yes, that,” he nodded. “But I only told you about it. I feel that you need to know more than just a story.”

She shook her head. “You’re not going to...what? No. That is something for men.” She stood up abruptly. “There will be no bleeding here, Yeshueh. So help me...”

“Come, my little dwarf,” he laughed as he took her hands in his. “No, I promise, no cutting, bleeding, or men dressed up as sacrificial animals. But while the Sons of Light eschew women in their holy ceremonies, I don’t think that’s the way Adonai intended it. Wasn’t Ava with Adan? Did not Noach take his wife aboard the *tevet*, as well as each of his sons? Moshe had his Tzipora and Avraham his Sarah. Just because the scribes who wrote the stories left the women in the margins, I don’t doubt that Sarah was by Avraham’s side when Adonai covenanted with him. Why would she, his princess, be left out of his kingly promise?”

She dipped her head to one side and shrugged her shoulders. “It would be nice if more men would allow that women are people too,” she admitted. “But you’re not going to make me prostrate myself in front of you, are you?”

“If I could get you to do that, it would be a miracle indeed,” he laughed aloud. “But no, you will make the same covenants with less theater, no costumes, and I guarantee, no cutting.”

The sun was dipping behind the hill as he sat Miri back on the stone wall and began rehearsing to her the instruction and directions he had received in the darkened *Heichal* in Secacah. She was allowed to say *amin, amin, amin* from her seat, and Shueh only drew his newly-pared thumbnail across her clothing in the same places where he had been cut. Like him, she was able to answer all the questions at the end. But unlike the crowd of men and the uncovering of lights, it was only two people who sat tightly wrapped in each other’s arms as the last rays of the sun tinged the sky above the hills.

This is where Shel found them later as he came down the road with a lamp. “Did you become lost?” he asked as he found

them. "A little while ago I thought I saw a bright light here. I wondered if you built a fire for the night."

"No," Shueh said as if waking from a pleasant dream. "We are not lost. A bright light, eh? Did you see the smoke that went up from it?"

Shel was confused. "It is dark. I can see fire but not smoke."

"No matter," Shueh said as he stood up and helped Miri to her feet. "I'm assuming you have found lodging for us."

"And dinner," Miri added.

"The bedding is fresh and soft, there is beef on the table, and the wine is excellent," Shel reported. "Please follow me."

They followed closely in the puddle of his lamplight, avoiding the half-buried walls and tussocks of grass. Shueh looked down into Miri's eyes, flashing brilliantly from the reflected lamplight against the dark. She smiled back up at him with the same smile she had worn on her wedding night, so many years ago.

"I hope the wine is as good as you say," Shueh called to Shel. "I am as thirsty as a racehorse. It has been a very long day."

"Yes, yes, and yes," Shel tersely confirmed each of Shueh's points.

"Amin, amin, and amin" echoed Miri's soft voice.

15 Sivan - He Shall Decide with Equity for the Meek of the Earth

Isaiah 11:4

Shueh sat in his seat at the table just next to the high table looking up at Yehuda and Machla. His youngest brother was all grown up. He looked ready to take on the world. His bride was as bright as the flowers that adorned her headdress. Her sidelong glances at her new husband showed her complete acceptance of this arranged marriage. Yakov had done well in bringing about the match. Since their father had died some time ago, and since Shueh was away on travels often, it had fallen to Yakov, the second eldest, to take on the patriarchal role in this marriage. He sat beaming with great pleasure, presiding over this feast, with Peninah at his side, who seemed distracted by the behavior of her own sons darting back and forth between the tables. Avram and Tamar, the bride's parents, were deep in conversation with one of their guests. The musicians were tootling and scraping a lively dance tune, to which he saw his sister Marta frolicking with her eldest daughter. At his left Miri was engaged in pulling every last bit of flesh off her lamb chop. To his right, his mother had her hand cupped to her ear, trying to hear what the bride's parents were discussing.

The three-day journey from Shiloh had been uneventful, each day becoming somewhat less long and less tiring. But when they had arrived in Natrat ready for a rest, they found Yehuda waiting impatiently for them. The marriage had been arranged for some time, and his bride had been diligently waiting and preparing for the day. But Yakov, who in his role as acting father of the groom was responsible for choosing the actual day of the wedding at the last possible moment, had been waiting for Shueh's and Miri's arrival. A boy had been sent that night running to Kanna to alert the bride's father that the wedding would happen at noon on *Shabbat* eve.

After dinner that night, Shueh had taken his wife and mother out into the garden courtyard. There he revealed, in much more detail than even Miri had heard, the story of his coming to know who he was. He rehearsed scenes from his childhood, events from his youth, stories of his marriage, and finally his coming up out of the water in Yardan. His mother, who had been weeping

on Miri's shoulder the entire time, broke down in wracking sobs as he tried to describe meeting his Father. He gently knelt and held her for several long moments as they cried together.

"It was so hard not to tell you," Miryam had finally been able to say. "Oh, how I wanted to tell you everything."

"I know, *ima*," he comforted her. "But I'm glad you didn't. I now have this great knowledge, and I have obtained it of myself, not from anyone else. Someday you can tell me all you wanted to tell me before."

She took his shoulders in her arms and held him tight, raising her eyes to the full moon just now rising over the hills, and whispering repeatedly "*T'rawmim nafshi l'marya*."

The moon still hung visibly in the western sky when they arose early in the morning to make the two-hour trek to Kanna. Yehuda practically pulled the oxcart along in his excitement to get there. Shel, seeing Shueh safely surrounded by loving family, went to the head of the company where he was telling stories to the boys of the younger generation. Shueh and Miri had been content to amble along behind with Miryam, quietly bringing her up to date to what had transpired since going to see Yoni across Yardan. When they finally arrived in Kanna, the wedding preparations were already in full swing. Bread was starting to pop out of the ovens, the lamb was browning as it turned on the spit, garlands and ribbons were being hung, and the wine was already flowing.

Since Shueh and Miri had no official obligations, they took the time to introduce themselves to various members of the bride's family. Shueh marveled at Miri's social graces. She had a knack of finding an instant connection with each person, making them feel comfortable, and leaving them with a laugh and a smile. He also noted her particular attention to the children, taking every one of them up in her arms (it was not a long journey) and heaping kisses on them. He knew the pain of not having children of her own niggled at the back of her soul, but he also knew her joy in others' children was pure and genuine.

Since this was an out of town wedding, all had decided it best that the whole wedding procession did not need to troop back to Yehuda's father's home in Natzrat, as was the custom. A suitable home at been found belonging to one of Yehuda's

cousins. He would take her into this, her “new home” at the culmination of the feast, but that was yet hours distant. There was yet much singing, dancing, eating and drinking to be done.

“Can you hear what he’s saying?” Shueh heard his mother whisper in his ear. “I don’t think it is good news.” She was politely indicating the conversation taking place between the bride’s parents and their relative.

“I’m certain it is no concern of ours,” Shueh replied, dipping a bread crust in some rather tasteless hummus. He was surprised that Miryam would pry into other people’s conversations. She was usually much more discreet. Perhaps this was something he should attend to as well?

He looked up, chewing thoughtfully, as the bride’s father motioned to Yakov. He saw him mouth something overtly, but he could not quite make out what he was saying.

“They’re running low on wine,” Miryam translated for him. “What are you going to do?”

“Me?” coughed Shueh, spraying bread crumbs about the table and dripping hummus onto his tunic. “This is Yakov’s *mishta*, not mine.”

But even as he said it, he saw Yakov motioning to him to come up to the high table. Shueh tried brushing the crumbs off his clothing while Miri dabbed at the glob of hummus with a wet cloth. He knelt next to Yakov, his face turned away from the crowd, so Yakov could whisper in his ear.

“It seems my timing was off after all,” Yakov confided. “Since *Shabbat* was approaching, Avram did not think we would arrive until next week. He had arranged for another shipment of wine from Tiberias arrive on the day after *Shabbat*. We are running dangerously low.”

“And what do you expect me to do?” Shueh asked.

“I don’t know,” Yakov said irritably, “but *ima* kept pointing at you like she knew that you knew something.

Shueh slowly rotated his head to glare at his mother, but saw her beaming, full of innocence, and motioning him to come back to her. He rose slowly and traced his steps back to her, dreading what he knew she would ask him.

“They have no more wine?” she asked, confirming what she already knew to be the case.

“Yes, *ima*,” he said patiently. “They are almost out, and the next shipment is not scheduled for two more days.”

“So what are you going to do about it?” she asked. “Yakov may be the acting father-of-the-groom, but in reality that title should have fallen to you, had you not been out traipsing around the land with high priests and princes.”

“Ima!” Shueh scolded. “You know that I...”

She interrupted him. “I know exactly what you have been doing. You have been searching out among your betters how you should go about coming out as *Mashiach*. Should you get these men to support you, or that man, or a prince or a priest. Tell me, my blessed boy, what has come of all that?”

“That I should trust none of them, but go about it myself, in my own way,” he replied meekly.

“And what is your own way?” Miryam prompted.

“I don’t know,” he shook his head. “I honestly don’t know. I’m waiting for the right moment, and I don’t think my hour has come yet.”

Miryam took him by his chin, turning his head to look at the revelers. “Tell me what you see.”

“Dancing, singing, eating, and much too much drinking, it appears,” Shueh replied.

“And the people,” she asked, “Are the dancers sad? Are the feasters mournful? Are they singing sad songs?”

“No, *ima*, they are not,” Shueh dutifully replied.

“And when you were closeted with dusty old men in a smoky room, or near to being pushed off the temple wall, or being introduced to your future kingdom on a hill, were you ever so full of joy?” Her eyes seemed to penetrate his soul more deeply with each questioning phrase.

Shueh remembered being interested, fearful, excited, and engaged. But no, he had never been joyful.

“Do men exist to sacrifice to God?” she continued to grill him. “Do women exist only to bear the next generation? Do boys exist just to fetch the goats? Why do we exist? Why did God create us?”

Shueh found himself being pulled deep into the moment. The world seemed to stand still in time around him. He heard the disjointed sounds of music being played, children singing songs,

adults laughing, cups and platters clanking, and fire crackling. And then he seemed to soar up high above the town. As he rose he heard other celebrations, but he also heard less joyous things. He heard slaves being whipped by their masters and crying out in pain. He heard mothers in the throes of childbirth. He heard orphan children begging for bread. He heard the clash of sword on shield and the tramp of iron-booted feet. But above and beneath and through it all, like wafting smoke from the sacred altar or the incense shovel, he heard prayers ascending to heaven. 'Help me with this.' 'Keep that from happening.' 'I'm lost!' 'I don't know what to do!' 'Help me find my way.' He was close to being overcome by the pain and anguish of the cries and the cacophony of war and turmoil when, above and beyond all the sound and smoke, he saw a light shining. It was warm, soft light. It was the same light he had seen above Yordan. It slowly descended and enveloped and cocooned him.

He came back to the present, seeing his mother's lovely face full of concern and hope. "Men are that they might have joy," he uttered, not knowing beforehand what he would say. He marveled at the simplicity of the words, but the depth and breadth of their meaning.

"And men would be a lot more joyous if they had something to drink," he heard Miri's voice from behind him.

"What, are you in on this too?" he turned, laughing as he planted a kiss on her cheek.

"Hey, if your *ima* is taking you somewhere, I'm going along," she said as she pinched his nose.

"But how am I to find more wine?" Shueh asked. But even as Miryam and Miri started giving him suggestions, his head exploded in a vision of sudden understanding. He remembered seeing on the mountainside above Mai'in the very elements of the earth, sky, water, and fire. These four were not the actual elements, as the *Goyim* said, but merely the four essences in which the elements expressed themselves. Inside each of the essences were tinier bits of matter, with various numbers of stationary parts and little bits of almost nothingness whizzing about them at breakneck speeds. It was how many little bits and parts the substance had that dictated how the essence was manifest. He looked over to Miryam's wine cup, looking deep

inside with his mind's eye, seeing the bits string themselves together into seemingly long chains, but whose length was infinitesimal. He saw the difference between the short chains that made the water, and the chains of various lengths that made the wine. If he could find a substance that contained the bits not already in the water, then perhaps he could somehow alter them and form them into long chains. But how? His fingers loomed like mountains above the tiny pebbles of matter he would have to change.

But then he looked deeper. The little parts and whizzing bits grew large like the monuments in the middle of the racing circus with horses and chariots whipping around at almost imperceptible speeds. But above and beneath and beyond and through the monuments and chariots there were tiny points of light, bobbing and darting to and fro, but almost never touching anything. He suddenly felt a kinship with these specks, as if he could talk to them. Sure enough, as soon as they seemed to become aware of his attention, they aligned themselves like soldiers awaiting orders.

In his mind he asked them to take that bit of water that was bobbing about and turn it into wine. Instantly the message filled his mind that materials were required. Water did not contain all that was needed for wine. He looked about on the table and saw a bit of charred meat, some almond slivers, and a bowl of cream. He compared the composition of the elements in those foods, ticking off each of the items in the long strings of the wine. Taking a dab of cream on his fingers, he mashed it together with the almond and the meat and dipped his finger into his own wine cup.

The little light specks seemed almost to rejoice as they tore into the mixture he had added. Soon enough he could see in his mind's eye the water combining with the sludge as chains were built, folded, and blossomed into wine. He nodded in thanks to the little bits of light, who promptly returned to their bobbing and weaving as if nothing at all had happened.

He drew in a sharp breath and returned to the present. It turns out he had not actually done anything with his fingers or food, but had been manipulating them in his mind alone. But nonetheless, he now knew what to do. He reached out and patted

his wife playfully on her head, then bent and kissed his mother firmly on the cheek. "I'm going to make some joy," he said. "Do you want to come with me and see?"

They got up and excused themselves from the festivities and made their way to the marketplace where fountain bubbled from the earth into a catch basin. Shueh found a couple of teenage boys who had not been invited to the party lounging about. "Would you boys be so kind as to fetch me those empty water pots and fill them up?" Shueh asked them. One of them jumped right up, but the other stared with a blank expression, not moving a muscle. "I'll gladly pay you for your effort," Shueh added. This got the other boy to his feet, and they were soon wrangling several stone waterpots, each almost as big as themselves. They began the long process of ladling water from the catch basin into the pots while Shueh began to poke about the mostly abandoned marketplace, picking up a few leaves, some bits of bone, a bit of dust, and a dry rind of cheese.

When the boys had finished filling one of the pots, he returned and remarked that it was not full yet. He wanted it to be filled to the brim. They dutifully complied, but when they saw Shueh casting bits of leaves, dirt, bone, and cheese into the fresh water, they wrinkled their noses and grunted in disgust. Miri and Miryam were also somewhat disgusted, but they at least knew what he was about to do. When Shueh was content with the amount of each item he added was enough, he borrowed a walking stick that had been left against a wall and gave the pot a good stir. Then, as the boys watched, wondering what vile thing he would add next, he laid his hands on the rim of the pot. He closed his eyes and murmured *nehwé ts'vyânâk*.

"Whose will be done?" hooted one of the boys. "What are you trying to make, a witches brew?"

Shueh looked up and cocked an eyebrow at him. "I promised you payment. Would you like a drink?"

"Not on your life," he jeered. "That's nothing but pig slop, that is."

"Suit yourself," he said, "but please continue filling up the other pots." Turning to Miryam, he asked "Would you like to be the first to taste the first fruits of my ministry?"

She cast a wary eye on him, but trusting in what she did know, she put out her hand for the ladle that he offered her. Putting it to her lips, she sipped noisily with a doubtful face. But immediately her eyes shot open wide as she savored the wine on her tongue. "That is..." she could come up with no word to describe what she tasted.

"Heavenly?" Shueh prompted her.

"Oh, my goodness, yes!" she exclaimed as she tipped the entire ladle's contents into her mouth. Soon Miri and the boys were clamoring for a taste as well.

"If I could make wine like this," the boy purred with dreamy eyes, "I'd be the richest man in town."

"Well, you'll get wine enough to pay for your services," Shueh reminded him, "*after* you have filled all the pots."

Shueh then returned to the feast, found Shel amidst the revelers, and asked him to get a few other hands to transport another pot of wine that 'had been forgotten.' Shueh took his seat and awaited their return, while Yakov tried desperately to pin down his attention with gestures and looks. A brief time later a steward appeared bearing a generous pitcher of wine, from which he refilled the cups of those at the high table. Another toast was called for, and the wine was brought to their lips. But instead of bottoms up and more cheers, a sudden silence fell on the party. They sipped their wine again. Instead of swallowing, they rolled the fluid between their teeth and over their tongue. Finally, Avram did put his cup's bottom in the air, drained his glass, and stood up.

"I am not certain what kind of family my daughter is marrying into," he said in a loud voice, "But I think I am going to enjoy it." Many cheers erupted, but Avram continued "Most men put out the good wine at the beginning of the feast, so that when we are all good and drunk, the cheap stuff can be poured out, and we will not know the difference. But Yakov ben Yousef, you have outdone yourself! The wine you ordered for us and put out first, well, it was as good a wine as ever, and we drank every last drop of it. But the stuff you serve to us now? It is the best wine I have ever tasted in my entire life!"

As he spoke, other stewards were flitting among the revelers, refilling their cups. They tasted this new wine, nodded their

approval, drained their cups, saluted Yakov's goodness, and called loudly for more.

But before Yakov could look down from his table to thank Shueh, he had slipped out again, with Miri's hand in his, heading back to the spring to finish transforming the other pots of water and to pay the boys for their efforts.

"This is your ministry then?" Miri asked. "Getting every one drunk?"

"Well, if and when it comes to that, yes," he answered. "But more. That's just the first step. Bring them joy. Make them happy. Fill their bellies, bind their bones and cure their sickness. Then, when they can see past the evils of the day, they might be able to see the goodness and love of God."

"That's men for you," she laughed. "Always thinking with their stomachs."

"Excuse me, my little dwarf," he playfully slapped her hip. "Who was it that was out there for forty days thinking on an empty stomach?"

"I know," she replied. "Just kidding. But really, I am pleased. That is something I can see myself being a part of. Leading armies and debating leaders, that's man's work. But feeding people dinner and then having a chat. I think I could follow you there."

"I hope you follow me everywhere," Shueh said as he began mixing up a batch of odds and ends for the next water pot. "We've got a long path ahead of us."

"Straight and true?" she asked.

"No," he replied. "Twists and turns."

"But on a level plain, right?" she winked.

"Hardly," he corrected. "Straight up and down."

She cupped her elbow in her other palm, scratched her cheek and said, "Bring it on."

A BRIEF INTERMISSION