

## 19 Iyyar - The singers were as one

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2 Chronicles 5:13

Andreas did not want to leave this new Adn 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 Beit-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 Beit-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 *Qub'a* 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 their parents' settlement 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 feted 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 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 Yeshu’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. Yeshu’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 Yeshu 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 Yeshu 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,” Yeshu 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 Yeshu’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 Eliyahu 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 Yeshu. “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 Yeshu of his errand, he had no idea how Yeshu 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,” Yeshu 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.”

Yeshu 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,” Yeshu 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,” Yeshu 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 bad idea,” Shel pronounced from where he leaned against the rock wall.

“How so, my *orvie*,” asked Yeshu. “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,” Yeshu pried a little further, “you think it unwise to go?”

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

“A valid argument,” Yeshu 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 Beit-Abara,” Andreas paused, “with your permission, of course.”

“I am ready to go,” Yeshu 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 Beit-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.”

Yeshu 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 the midmorning breeze as it puffed quietly over the rock and stones. “I will go,” Yeshu 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?”  
Yeshu asked sarcastically.

“I am Shelyeshu’a,” he reminded them. “Where Yeshueh goes, there go I.” With that, he moved toward Yeshu’s cache of supplies.

“You won’t find anything there worth packing,” Yeshu 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 said “Moshe, you stay away from that nasty bird.”

Yeshu 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, Yeshu raised his hand high over his head. As if awaiting the signal, Eliyahu swooped down from his perch. Yeshu 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, Yeshu began picking his own way down the hill. Eliyahu hopped about a few times and called out in loud caws. Yeshu 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 Yeshu'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," Yeshu 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 Yeshu 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 Yeshu just wiped his forehead and looked over the waters of the sea. Andreas, just noticing that Yeshu carried no bottle, abruptly stopped drinking and offered his bottle to Yeshu.

"Thank you, but no." Yeshu 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,” Yeshu 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 boy 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, 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 must 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 *Shabbat* day’s journey from the camp. They are so strict in keeping the law of Moshe that they don’t even relieve their bowels on *Shabbat*, 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,” Yeshu 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 Shlomo’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 Yeshu, there were no more communal water stops, but each took clandestine swigs from their bottles. But as if as a sign

of Elaha'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, Yeshu 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, Yeshu 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 Yeshu about his time on the mountainside, but seeing as he was focused on maintaining a good pace, it fell to Shel to explain what Yeshu 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 Yeshu's shoulder.

*Hammer hammer, clink clink  
How many masons do you think  
Shlomo 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.”

Yeshu, 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,” Yeshu laughed. “Hammer hammer, clink clink.”

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

“Sing it like you mean it,” Yeshu 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!” Yeshu 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 Noach’s *tevet*. Yeshu 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 Yeshu 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 Yeshu'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 Yeshu 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. It was a small affair, mostly used by officials traveling to the outposts further down the road and a few tourists who insisted on stopping between their camps on the Salt Sea and Yericho. Yeshu 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.