

PESSAH BAR-ADON PORTRAIT OF AN ARCHAEOLOGIST

by

Shoshana HEIMAN *

He burst upon the desert, like one possessed.

He rose early, strapped on a water-bottle, thrust some dry bread and a handful of olives into his knapsack.

He sped off in the direction of the beckoning wind. His eyes scanned each boulder protruding through the surface, seeking out every cluster of stones hidden from view as if it was signalling in some arcane code and attesting to the remains of an ancient settlement, human traces from bygone days. But mainly his sharp eyes followed the rhythms of the bare hills and mountains, discovering the entrances to the caves that snaked into the very heart of the mount.

From his youth, still at his studies, the spirit of the desert, of freedom, plucked at him. Free as a bird carried on the currents of air through the clouds he moved lightfooted in the trail of the bedouins, the wild tribes of the desert, until they adopted him as a son. Three full years he herded the flocks in the desert hills of the Hauran, learnt the dialects of the Bedouin tongue, became alert to the winds of the wilderness and the secrets of its paths. Later, the scorched Judean Desert set his imagination aflame. This desert is abundant in caves in which ancient parchment scrolls have been discovered, marvelously preserved in the dry air of the lowest desert on earth.

At the beginning of the 1960s he set out at the head of one of four archaeological expeditions to survey a number of caves in the desert valleys.

It fell to his lot to come upon a large cave in the valley wall overhanging Nathal Mishmar, and the approach to it was possible only by a rope ladder anchored to the rock over a deep chasm.

The dig in the cave lasted a whole season. They cleaned it out; lying on their bellies they removed from it an enormous amount of thick dust, clinging and suffocating. After the effort of an entire season the cave yielded up not a single find that might signify if it was worth going on

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for another season. The group of diggers, drawn to this radiant man whose ardour had sparked their imagination, broke up.

When the next excavating season came round he decided, contrary to the counsel of his archaeologist friends, following an inner, mysterious call, to return to the cave for another look. This time he went to the place at his own devices, again followed by enthusiastic volunteers, whose only payment was being in the presence of this special man, who shared with them his dreams.

They went back to that cave, clear of dust, back to peer into every crack and every fissure, and so it was that one of the volunteers came upon a slight space between two rocks. When together they started to shift one of the rocks they found in the murk of the pit an object looking like a wrapped parcel. Tremendously excited and with bated breath they gingerly extricated it and began to unwrap it. From it they drew out, one by one, four hundred and twenty-nine mysterious ritual vessels, of copper, ivory and haematic stone, stunning in their beauty and perfect workmanship. He, in a daze at the magnificence and size of the hoard, in his haste used the field telephone to call David Ben-Gurion, then Prime Minister, and declared with great emotion : "Here is yet another *kushan* (title deed) attesting to our right to this land..."

Dispersed among the splendid objects there were also grains of ancient wheat and olive and date stones, all saved from decay and destruction by the dry desert climate. The objects also testified to the existence of refugees, some six millennia distant in time, who as they fled hid the symbols of their spirit in that cave until the storm might pass.

The experience of discovery of the Cave of the Treasure drove him, in the years that followed, again and again, to the vastnesses of the arid desert, to its tortuous tracks, to examine every cave and cranny, as if his legs sprouted wings, and the everlasting dream, the hope of one more find to excite and reverberate across the world obsessed his soul.

Leaping from rock to rock, cave to cave, scraping away the heavy, sticky dust : perhaps hidden beneath is one more object or sign of another treasure. Each day darkness fell, and with it came weariness; but the next morning a new day dawned bringing fresh hope. Thus the weeks passed, the months, and years, but the longing and the perpetual expectation never grew dry.

One day he caught sight of the opening to a cave overhanging a deep gorge. There was no access to it, but this merely aroused his imagination more, here, in the heart of the desert, without water or shade.

He approached a friend, a senior army officer, for help and support in conducting a survey of the cave. His friend called in an entire unit with all its equipment, its tents, its small and large tools, a kitchen, and food, and a sentry roster.

The whole unit set off into the desert, to that awesome place, without shade, only sharp flint stones, fieldmice, wasps, yellow scorpions and the sun beating down without mercy.

Towards evening the unit pitched its tents near the cave. Early next morning, after some fruitless attempts, the ladder was fixed to the top of the rock, and the first men climbed down to

the cave entrance. The rockfall there was heavy and the thick, stifling dust blocked ingress to the depths of the cavern.

Ant-like, they slowly penetrated the interior, removing dust and rocks, returning to their tents at sunset worn out, grimy, exhausted.

The days followed each other, and they cleared away the rubble. They came upon a second chamber, and charred wooden beams suspended from the ceiling, on which were marks of fire and soot, of ancient times. But of other finds there were none.

The ritual of scraping away the dirt went on, day by day, each morning bearing its hopes, each evening its disappointments.

In a desert township, a few hours' journey distant along a track hardly passable, a television crew waited to document the resounding discovery of the finds...

Deep despair began to take hold, after excavations lasting almost three weeks without a single significant find. In the evenings Pessah tried to rally the drooping spirits, telling legends of the desert, but nothing could relieve the profound disappointment and the depression of the parched, unshaded spot, the birds of prey wheeling above, as though circling a carcass, just awaiting the camp to be struck, the flight of those who had invaded their realm.

The souls of the scrapers, stretched to the limits of their capacity, began to shrivel.

Three weeks later, exactly the span allotted to the task, the camp broke up, and in fragile silence the unit returned to its base.

The great hope evaporated with the winds of the desert and there remained only the shadow of Pessah's outstanding personality, like a monument in the desert around which tales are woven, motionless, unstimulating in that eerie place...