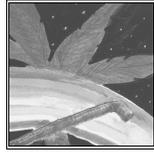


CHAPTER ONE



Miracles don't happen anymore. They haven't happened for years. God made some big promises, way back when. And in the beginning, He kept them all.

He made of Abraham a nation. He gave Sarah a son in her old age - even though she laughed at Him. He brought Joseph and his brothers to the land of Goshen in Egypt, saving the Israelites from starvation. The people had faith that God would always be with them.

But that was a long time ago. By now He must have forgotten all about it.

Leah's heart felt hard as she stood in the Nile, lost in gloomy thought. It was so hot the river's flow barely cooled her off.

"Gotcha!" laughed Leah's twin brother Jacob as he popped out of the Nile right in front of her. He splashed her lightly in the face.

Leah scrunched up her eyes and mouth, annoyed.

"Stop being such a baby, Jacob."

Jacob's eyes widened. "What'd I do?"

Leah sighed deeply. She turned away from him and gazed upriver, towards Pharaoh's white palace in the distance. The heat made it shimmer as if it were underwater.

Jacob watched her, knowing what she was thinking but waiting for her to say it out loud.

A short distance from them, knee-deep in the Nile, were some teenage Israelite girls beating white cloths with long sticks. Leah could tell by the slow way they lifted their arms that they were hot and tired. But they didn't dare stop doing laundry to go swimming in the river. They were slaves, and there was a burly Egyptian taskmaster on the shore, his whip hanging from his belt.

Then Leah noticed something strange.

A few feet away something red and curvy seemed to be floating just under the surface of the Nile.

For an instant she thought it might be a snake. But it was too long and thick for that. And it was changing shape.

"What's that?" she asked, pointing. Jacob turned.

"Weird," he said when he saw what she was pointing at.

Leah began wading toward the red thing. It seemed even bigger and wider than it had been a few seconds before.

Jacob stood still for a moment, unsure of what to do. Then he went with her.

Suddenly they were surrounded by it. It was the water! The Nile was turning red!

Leah screamed. She tried to run out of the river, but the current was pulling at her arms and legs. They felt terribly heavy.

She splashed crazily. She didn't want that red stuff touching her skin. But she only managed to get it everywhere, including her thick brown hair where it clung in globs.

Jacob quietly gazed at the red liquid, then up at Leah. The red stuff felt grainy, a little like the flour Savta, their grandmother, mixed into warm water in the early mornings when she was making bread.

He caught Leah's eye.

As soon as she saw how calm her brother was, Leah's panic faded.

She stopped splashing and looked at her hands under the water. Powdery stuff was drifting slowly through the river like red clouds.

"I think it's just mud," Jacob said.

"I've never seen anything like it," Leah shuddered.

"Me either. We probably should get out."

"Okay," Leah was ashamed at having been so scared of mud.

But then she had to laugh when Jacob climbed up on the bank. He was as red as a poppy blossom from the ribcage down.

"You look like an Egyptian painting," she giggled.

Then she remembered that she probably looked worse.

"Yeah, and you look like Set," teased Jacob. The Egyptian god of the desert had red eyes and hair.

"Well, at least I'm a god, like Pharaoh," Leah bragged. "Fetch my scepter, slave!"

Jacob grinned. His sister was back to her old self. He pretended to speak to someone behind him. "Fetch her scepter, Israelite!" Then he turned back to Leah and shrugged. "Oops, I'm the Israelite."

Leah grew serious again. "But you're not a slave yet," she said softly.

Their birthday was coming up. In two weeks they would be 12 years old. Then they would have to join the rest of their family in the city of Pithom, just up the Nile.

Two more weeks of freedom. Two more weeks of playing in the river and running errands and helping Savta in the house. Two more weeks of lessons with Great-Uncle David, who could no longer work as a slave because of a bad knee. So he told the ancient stories and taught Israelite children the ways of their people before they, too, faced the blazing sun and the taskmasters' whips.

Two more weeks. Then it would be their turn.

Only a miracle could save them. And miracles didn't happen anymore. At least not as far as Leah could tell.

Jacob grimaced. "Savta's going to be furious at us for getting our clothes so dirty."

"Well, we can't very well wash them in the river," Leah grumbled. "Look."

The Israelite slaves were yelling at the burly Egyptian, holding up the red-stained white cloths.

"There's always the town spring," Jacob pointed out.

Leah sighed again. One of their last days of freedom, ruined by some stupid mud.

The twins held hands as they trudged home. Red dripped behind them on the path like a trail of blood.

CHAPTER TWO



Savta was terrified at first when she saw the two red-splashed children standing in the courtyard. But as soon as she realized they were all right she blew her stack.

“How could you scare your grandmother like that? Do you want to send me to my grave? I’ve never seen such thoughtless kids in all my life!” Savta threw up her hands in a gesture that the twins knew wasn’t quite as despairing as it looked. “I’m too old for this. It’s time for me to join my darling Yishai.”

Leah almost smiled. Whenever Savta started moaning about joining Saba, who had died before the twins were born, she was almost finished yelling at them.

“Oh no, Savta, don’t leave us,” Leah pleaded prettily. “We’re so sorry. Look, we’ll go wash up at the well. Maybe the mud will come off our clothes too.”

“And then we’ll clean the courtyard before we milk the goat,” promised Jacob.

Leah shoved her elbow into his side. She had hoped to get away without cleaning the courtyard.

Jacob ignored the elbow.

Savta sniffed. “And who’s going to fetch more grain from the storehouses for our stew tonight?” She shook her head sorrowfully. “Your family will be back in a couple of hours. They’ll be hungry and nothing will be ready, all because of you.”

She turned away from them and started up the ramp into the house.

Leah was stung. “It wasn’t our fault!” she called after Savta.

“It doesn’t matter whose fault it is,” Savta called out in victory as she entered the mud-brick house that was home to them all.

“All that matters is that YOU have to do something about it,” the twins finished under their breath.

“It’s just not fair,” Leah added in frustration.

Jacob gazed helplessly at her.

“I don’t want to be a slave in two weeks either,” he said. “But I’m trying not to think about it so much.”

Leah avoided his eyes. She looked up.

A thin trail of delicious-smelling steam was wafting from the pot of lentils over the cookfire on the flat roof of the house. The twins would have loved a snack, but they knew their grandmother would be really angry if they went into the house to get a cucumber or a piece of melon before cleaning up.

So Leah picked up a large waterskin and flung it hard over her shoulder, letting it slap loudly against her back. Jacob quietly picked up a basket for the grain, and they left the courtyard together.

The well was crowded. After the Nile flooded, the weather generally cooled off. But this year it had stayed amazingly hot. Many weeks after the floods, it was still much hotter than usual. People gathered around the well for a refreshing drink and a rinse on most afternoons.

Jacob was done washing off the mud first, since he didn't have any in his face and hair. So the twins decided to separate. Leah would fill the skin with water from the spring when she was finished cleaning up, and Jacob would get the grain.

Jacob wasn't nervous about going to the storehouse. He knew all the Egyptians there and they knew him.

They were older men who used to work as taskmasters. Now they could sit in the shade waiting for the Israelites to come by and get their rations, instead of standing out in the hot sun with their whips.

The hot sun and the whips that Jacob would face in two weeks.

He drooped at the thought.

Then he shook his head. *That is the life of an Israelite*, he thought. *There's nothing I can do about it, so it's no use complaining.*

As he approached the storehouse, he saw his friend Avishai on line for grain. Jacob smiled. Great-Uncle David taught both of them Hebrew, but Avishai wasn't very good at writing. He just wanted to make songs out of David's wonderful stories and practice playing the lute, like his grandmother Miriam.

Avishai stared at Jacob. "Why are you so wet?" he asked.

"Leah and I were swimming in the river and got really muddy," Jacob explained.

"The flood season ended weeks ago," said Avishai. Miriam had taught him all kinds of things about Egypt, including when the three seasons of the year began and ended. But he still couldn't write his Alef-Bet. "It's been really hot since then, so maybe some of the grain sprouted early and is being washed into the Nile. That might be making things muddier than usual."

Jacob thought of the blood-red color in the river, and shrugged. "Maybe."

An old woman received her grain with a smile from the Egyptian overseer dressed all in white. The line moved up. There were two more people before it was Avishai's turn.

Avishai moved closer to Jacob and lowered his voice. "We have a visitor at home," he said very quietly, so that even the next person in line wouldn't be able to hear. "It's my great-uncle Moshe. He's Savta and Great-Uncle Aharon's brother. Abba told me Moshe was one of the first babies to be saved many years ago, when the old Pharaoh was killing all the boys."

Jacob knew the story. Raamses' father had ordered all the male Israelite infants to be killed before they were a week old. Some were hidden, but many more were drowned.

After a while Pharaoh didn't have enough slaves to do all the work. He realized he had made a mistake. So he let all the Israelite babies live and lowered the age of slavery from 15 to 12.

Now Raamses was doing the same thing to the sons of Israel - stupidly, in Jacob's opinion. There was almost no one under the age of 11 in all of Goshen, because the Israelites were afraid to have children. Raamses would run out of slaves pretty soon, just like his father did. The store-city of Pithom would never be finished at this rate.

"Where's your great-uncle visiting from?" Jacob asked curiously. He wondered why Avishai was being so secretive.

"From the mountain of El Shaddai," answered Avishai, in an even lower voice than before. "He has seen and spoken to the God of our ancestors."

Jacob was about to grin and make a joke. Avishai's great-uncle had been with El Shaddai? What would his friend dream up next? Even Great-Uncle David would be too reverent to mention El Shaddai by name in one of his miracle stories.

But then Jacob saw Avishai's eyes. They looked different, somehow. Brighter, and yet more peaceful. As if he had learned a great truth.

"Moshe," Jacob murmured. "That's a funny name."

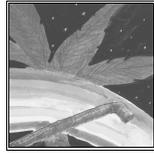
"It's Egyptian and means, 'taken from the waters.' Pharaoh's daughter found him when my great-grandma Yocheved put him into a basket and let him float down the Nile. He was raised as an Egyptian prince. But when he saw how the Israelites were treated he killed a taskmaster who was beating a slave and then ran away. Now he's back."

Jacob's eyes had widened to the size of the precious stones in Pharaoh's breastplate.

"He's back to free us from slavery," Avishai said in an awed whisper.

Then the old woman in front of Avishai left with her grain, and the boys could speak of Moshe no more.

CHAPTER THREE



Jacob came home bursting to tell everyone his news. But he found Avishai's savta Miriam already there, deep in conversation with his savta.

The two white-haired women, wrinkled and a bit bent but still strong and thin, stood speaking quietly to each other at the top of the ramp leading into the house.

Leah was sprinkling water onto the dirt floor of the courtyard and sweeping the wet dirt with the stick broom. She pretended she wasn't trying to listen, but Jacob knew better.

Miriam turned and saw him. Her lovely brown eyes twinkled. "There's a meeting tonight at my house," she said in her usual quick way. "Both of you should go to two friends and tell them to tell two more friends. Everyone's invited."

She noticed Jacob's basket. Her eyes narrowed. "Did you meet Avishai at the storehouse?" she asked him.

Jacob nodded.

Miriam gazed at his face intently. "Did he say anything interesting?" she asked in a tone of voice that meant she already knew the answer.

Jacob nodded again. Leah gave him a sharp look.

"Come tonight," was all Miriam said. Then she walked briskly out of the courtyard.

Savta had seen the whole thing. "Come over here, Jacob," she said in a gentler voice than either of the twins had expected.

"Now both of you grind that grain so dinner's ready the minute everyone arrives," Savta directed. "I'll milk the goat. We'll have to eat quickly so we're not late for the meeting. When you're done with the grain you can go to your friends."

"What did Avishai say?" Leah demanded as soon as they were in the cool, dark house. She kneeled to scoop grain from the basket and put it into the mortar. Jacob took the long stick and began to pound, standing over her. A thick shaft of light came in from the back door.

"He said that his great-uncle Moshe had come back to Goshen from the mountain of El Shaddai, to free the Israelites from slavery," Jacob replied. "I don't know if I believe it myself, but Avishai sure did."

"The mountain of El Shaddai?" repeated Leah, sounding a little scared. "That's what Avishai said?"

"That's right."

Leah was quiet for several moments, adding more grain to the mortar. The only sound was the crunch, crunch of the pestle as it ground the grain to rough meal.

Miracles don't happen anymore, she thought. They haven't happened for years. Once God was with us, but that was a long time ago.

The words in her mind suddenly sounded wrong. They *felt* wrong.

Leah's heart took off like a hawk rising up into the sky.

She stood up to face Jacob and said breathlessly, "It's a miracle."

Jacob felt doubt harden in his chest.

"Let's not jump to conclusions here," he told his sister. "We haven't even seen this Moshe. Let's wait until tonight and hear what he has to say."

"Moshe. That's an odd name. Here, let's switch." Leah took the pestle, and Jacob kneeled next to the grain basket.

"Avishai says it's Egyptian. He says Moshe was saved from the old Pharaoh's decree when he was a baby. Pharaoh's daughter found him and he was raised a prince of Egypt. Then he killed a taskmaster who was beating an Israelite slave and ran away."

Leah shook her head. "I don't know how, but I just know it's a miracle." She gazed down with bright eyes at her brother. "Do you know what this means, Jacob? You and I will never be slaves. We'll escape."

Jacob tried to smile, but failed. What if she was wrong? What if this Moshe person was a fake? Or what if he thought he could free the slaves, but Pharaoh just ordered him to be put to death and that was the end of it?

"Let's just go to the meeting tonight, okay?" Jacob pleaded.

Leah smiled beautifully at him.

CHAPTER FOUR



The twins felt as if there were hummingbirds in their tummies when they got to Miriam's house. The whole family had come along: Savta, Abba, their father, Imma, their mother, their brothers Caleb and Shelumiel and their sister Shoshana.

Caleb and Shelly, as everyone called Shelumiel for short, were brick makers in Pithom. They left the house with Abba before sunrise every day to collect straw from their taskmasters and throw it into the mud pits. After the younger slaves had mixed the straw into the mortar by trampling the mud, Caleb and Shelly would carry heavy buckets of fortified mud over to the brick molds and pour it in.

If they were tired and spilled the mud over the mold, they might feel the sting of a leather whip on their backs.

Abba took some of the finished molds to the ovens after they had dried for a while in the sun. That was a full-grown man's work. The kilns were so hot that younger or older workers would soon faint carrying the loaded platters of mud through the sizzling air. It was very hard work. But baked bricks were valuable, so Abba was hardly ever whipped.

Shoshana and Imma worked in Pithom's great stables, clearing horse manure all day long. They were only whipped if the chief of Pharaoh's mounted troops happened to come by and saw a horse in a dirty stall. They considered themselves very lucky, because they got to be close to those intelligent, sensitive animals. But they weren't allowed to touch the horses.

Earlier in the evening, Savta had hurried everyone up to the roof of the house to eat. The whole family had chattered excitedly over dinner. Could it be possible? Had God at last remembered His promise to Israel? Or was it just a false hope born of the desperation of the Israelites, who feared to bring sons into the world because of Pharaoh's evil decree?

Miriam lived in her brother Aharon's house. Aharon was a well-respected elder from the tribe of Levi, and Miriam was considered wise in the ways of healing. She had delivered many of the children of Goshen with her own two hands. Even some of their parents.

Leah and Jacob's father was from the tribe of Reuben, the oldest of Israel's sons. So the males of his family were given the privilege of the firstborn: a place towards the front. The crowd gathering in Aharon's spacious courtyard made way for them, while Savta, Imma and the girls went over to the women's area.

Jacob saw his Great-Uncle David, sitting on a stool because of his bad knee. He squeezed through the adults and hugged David awkwardly.

David, smiling at the warm greeting, regarded him with bright eyes for a moment.

“You look like you already know what this meeting’s about,” he hinted through his wispy, graying beard.

“Sort of,” Jacob blushed. “Not really.”

“Good attitude,” David nodded. “Patience is a fine thing. But there is also such a thing as waiting patiently for too long.”

One of Aharon’s many lambs nuzzled up to Jacob, and he stroked its soft ears. *So Leah and I put together add up to one perfect person*, he thought.

Great-Uncle David was Savta’s baby brother. He was born a year after the old Pharaoh had stopped killing Israelite boys, and had amazed everyone with how quickly he’d memorized the stories of his people.

Then he had become a slave like his father and mother before him. A badly-cut stone had fallen off a low wall onto his leg after about five years in Raamses, Pharaoh’s other store-city besides Pithom. Only Miriam’s quick thinking had saved his life. She had cleaned the wound and made an ointment that had helped it to heal. Now everyone except his own family called him Rav David out of respect for his great learning.

Aharon’s four sons were standing at the bottom of the wide ramp, talking with Abba and some of the other men. Imma, Savta and Shoshana stood with Leah off to one side, greeting those women who were still arriving.

Then a hush fell over the gathering.

Aharon was coming out of the house and onto the platform at the top of the ramp.

He was an imposing figure, tall and grey-robed with an almost hairless skull. His skin was light, much lighter than Leah’s or any of her family’s, and he had high cheekbones and thin lips.

His voice was deep and rounded when he spoke. It had always surprised Leah to hear such a dark voice coming from that light-skinned face.

“I welcome all of you to my humble home,” he began, bowing low. “It is an honor to have so many of my brothers and sisters here together. May the Lord shine his light upon us all, and may He grant that we return to the land of our fathers, speedily and in our days.”

“Amen,” repeated many of the men. The women were all silent.

Leah felt a single thought pulse through the crowd: *Will we really be the generation to return to the land of Israel? Could it be true?*

“All of you know me,” Aharon said with feeling, now that the formalities were over. “But only very few of you ever knew that my mother Yocheved, may she rest in peace, had another son.”

There was a slight movement in the crowd.

“We called him Elmodad, or ‘The Measure of God,’ because we believed we would never take his measure since he had been doomed by Pharaoh’s decree,” continued Aharon.

“But my baby brother survived. He was brought up in the house of Pharaoh and called Moshe, because Pharaoh’s daughter herself drew him from the waters of the Nile where our mother had placed him in a basket.”

The crowd began whispering. Miriam swept aside the curtain covering the front door and stepped confidently onto the platform.

“I saw this with my own eyes,” she declared loudly. “My mother sent me to watch over the baby. When Pharaoh’s daughter took him from the basket, I revealed myself and said I could find a wet nurse to suckle him. Pharaoh’s daughter agreed, and Yocheved nursed her baby until he was weaned. Then I brought him to the palace, and for years I spied on him and watched him grow. When he was a man I showed him where he had come from, and welcomed him to his true home.”

The gathering grew restless. It all sounded too unbelievable to be true.

Jacob glanced over at Leah, standing with the other women. She was gazing at Miriam with shining eyes. He nudged his great-uncle.

“What do *you* think of this story?”

David raised his heavy salt-and-pepper eyebrows. “I can’t imagine Miriam is lying about it,” he commented. “But sometimes people remember what they feel they must.”

Jacob wasn’t sure what his teacher had meant by that. Was Miriam remembering wrong because she wanted to? He searched the crowd for Avishai, who was nowhere to be seen.

Aharon began to speak again, and the listeners grew silent. “After some time, Moshe left Egypt and went to Midian, where he married and lived the life of a shepherd.”

“Avishai told me that Moshe killed an Egyptian taskmaster, and that’s why he had to leave,” Jacob whispered to David.

“I can understand why Aharon wouldn’t mention that in front of all these people,” Great-Uncle David replied wryly.

“There,” continued Aharon in a voice filled with emotion, “he beheld El Shaddai on the mountain.”

The crowd gasped to hear that name spoken aloud. Someone called out, “How could he see the Lord and live?”

The curtain covering the door opened again, and a shorter, silver-bearded and flowing-haired version of Aharon walked out. He leaned slightly on a long, crooked shepherd’s staff. “That’s what ...” he began, and then gulped as everyone stared at him. “That’s what I wondered myself.”

“Moshe,” announced Aharon. He and Miriam went to the man and linked arms with him.

Silence descended on the courtyard.

Moshe seemed to glow like the moon. Kindness and understanding, but also a bit of playfulness, were etched in his face. He looked wise and aged and yet childlike at the same time.

To see him is to trust him, Jacob thought.

“The Lord told me to do this,” was all Moshe said. Then he raised his staff over his head, grasping it with both hands.

Everyone waited with bated breath for what would happen next. For several moments there was utter quiet except for the evening noises of birds and sheep.

Then someone in the crowd pointed at the staff and said, “Look! Do you see it?”

Jacob gazed harder at the staff. It looked like colors were rising into the air from it. A rainbow! Could it be that a rainbow was rising from the staff into the night sky? But that was impossible!

More fingers were pointing. There were gasps and cries.

“The sign of God’s promise!” called out Leah. Jacob’s eyes shot straight to her. She was hugging herself, her mouth half-open.

“The Lord has remembered Israel!” shouted someone else.

“He has brought our redeemer!” exclaimed another woman’s voice.

Jacob looked at Great-Uncle David, whose lips were curved in a smile.

“Do *you* see it?” he asked, not daring to look at the staff again himself.

“I see our people’s faith,” David replied quietly. “I see the strength of Israel.”

CHAPTER FIVE



The sign of the rainbow seemed to convince everyone gathered in Aharon's courtyard - except Jacob - that Moshe truly had been sent by Adonai to free the Israelite slaves. At the end of the meeting Aharon called out the names of the heads of families and asked them to remain.

Abba stayed behind while the rest of the family walked along the pounded dirt path back home.

Everyone was quiet as they left Aharon's house. They were all deeply impressed by what they had just witnessed.

But there was a good reason for their silence as well. Egyptian, Cushite and other families lived in Goshen too, and no one wanted to arouse suspicion. Pharaoh had spies everywhere.

Leah felt like she was walking on air. *I will never be whipped!* she kept thinking. *I will never be a slave!*

Jacob stole glances at his family as they went home. Caleb, Shelly and Leah looked as if they had already been set free. Their heads were high, and there was a spring in their step.

Imma seemed almost dazed. *She can't believe it,* Jacob thought.

Savta seemed determined, as though she were on some kind of mission. But she almost always looked that way. Either there was food to be cooked or pots to be cleaned or floors to be swept or children to be yelled at. She attacked every task with the same zeal.

Now, maybe, she was readying herself to do whatever it took to free the Israelites.

Jacob watched Leah. She seemed so certain that Moshe would save them.

Their birthday was only 13 days away.

Abba would present them to the Egyptian overseer. Their names would be written onto the slave lists. Then they would be sent to their stations.

Jacob hoped he would be in the mud pits. It looked like pretty easy work, and he would get to see Caleb and Shelly several times a day. Maybe Leah would be a water carrier and he would see her too.

He just didn't want to have to go out in the fields. Nobody he knew worked there.

When they arrived home, Savta shooed everyone into the house. Normally they would have spent most of the evening on the rooftop, chatting and singing around the fire, or going over to their friends' houses and sitting on their roofs.

But today Savta didn't want anyone listening in on the conversation.

“What are all the heads of families doing now?” asked Caleb, the firstborn.

Savta and Imma were preparing a plate of figs and melon.

“They are helping Moshe and Aharon decide what happens next,” said Savta firmly. “It’s one thing to show us signs and wonders. It’s quite another to soften Pharaoh’s heart.”

“But Moshe will know how to do it,” put in Leah. “After all, he grew up in the palace.”

“It’s a real miracle,” said Shelly softly. “How could the son of an Israelite slave grow up there? And if the Lord can make one miracle in our days, He can make another.”

Imma sighed. “I hope you’re right,” she said as she plopped down onto a reed mat. She took a fig from the bowl in the center.

“When I was about your age, Leah, a rumor went around that the Lord was sending a redeemer,” Imma remembered. “It seemed so real. First they said he was coming from Canaan, then he had made it to Sukkoth, then he was just outside Raamses and would be here in the next day or two. He never came.”

Savta nodded. “I never believed all that claptrap,” she said. “It was just young people who didn’t want to work indulging in wishful thinking.”

She sat back a little. “But now that I think of it, Miriam pooh-poohed it as well,” Savta continued. “Now I know why. She knew that Moshe hadn’t come back yet.”

“But this time it IS real,” declared Leah in a clear voice. “It’s NOT just wishful thinking.”

Everyone looked at her. “Moshe is the servant of El Shaddai,” she said bravely. “He is going to free us from Pharaoh’s yoke.”

A smile spread around the circle at Leah’s innocent faith. It gave everyone strength.

Everyone except Jacob.

“Isn’t there anyone here who isn’t sure Moshe can do it?” Jacob asked.

There was silence as Jacob searched the faces of his family in the flickering lamplight. Imma and Savta were smiling at him. His older brothers and sisters looked surprised.

Leah seemed annoyed.

“I’d call you a party-pooper, but this is too important,” she said. “Jacob, do you always have to be so patient before you form an opinion? Can’t you be a little *impatient* once in a while?”

Just then they heard a noise in the courtyard. Imma jumped up.

“Abba’s back!” she exclaimed, and hurried to meet him. Everyone shifted to make room for the head of the household.

Abba came in and sat down while Imma put away his cloak and sandals.

“The council has come to a decision,” he told them all gravely. “Tomorrow morning Pharaoh will go to thank the Nile god for a good flood and to pray for the harvest. Moshe and Aharon will approach him. They will ask for permission for all the Israelites and their animals to travel three days into the wilderness in order to worship the Lord.”

“Why only three days?” asked Imma. She sounded disappointed.

“Moshe told us that the politics of the palace are complicated,” Abba replied. “If we simply ask for freedom, Pharaoh will lose face before his court.”

Imma shook her head. “He’ll know that if he lets all of us go for three days, with our children and our livestock, it means he will probably lose us forever.”

“But if we don’t come back, he’ll be able to cover himself,” Abba explained. “He could tell his advisors that he didn’t know we were lying.”

Savta grinned. “That sounds like Miriam’s thinking.”

Abba grinned back. “She was quiet the whole time, because this was a men’s meeting. But who knows what the three of them talk about when everyone is gone?”

Jacob spoke up. “I didn’t see Avishai at the meeting. Do you know where he is?”

Abba’s face fell. “I met his mother Magdiel on the way home. She was running to find Miriam. Avishai is sick.”

“What’s wrong with him?” asked Jacob, concerned.

“No one knows. He has a high fever, apparently.”

“But he was fine this afternoon!” Jacob exclaimed.

Leah took his hand. “I’m sure he’ll be all right.”

The next day dawned like any other. Abba, Caleb and Shelly were already gone. Imma and Shoshana were packing yesterday’s bread and figs into their satchels while Savta put the new loaf that had risen overnight into the oven.

The twins ate cold stew for breakfast, and fed the last little bit to the family goats. Then they washed up before heading over to Great-Uncle David’s house for their lessons.

Bezalel, Avishai’s cousin, and Tamar, one of the youngest girls in Goshen, were already waiting with Great-Uncle David and a couple of sheep under a palm tree.

Avishai wasn’t there.

Jacob was worried, but he was too polite to mention it.

“No lesson today,” announced David as soon as the twins sat down. “First we’re going to talk about what happened at Aharon’s house last night. Quietly.”

There was silence. David waited patiently for his students to think of something to say.

Leah sat with a small, confident smile on her face. She knew her own mind, but was curious to hear the others first.

Finally Tamar, who was only ten, spoke up. “I didn’t really get the whole thing, Rav David, but my imma saw kind of a light over the man’s staff and she said it was a miracle.”

“Did you see it too?” asked David.

Tamar shrugged. David looked at Bezalel, who shrugged as well. “I wasn’t near the front,” he said. “I could hardly see a thing.”

“I saw a rainbow rising into the night sky,” said Leah firmly. “It WAS a miracle. And do you know what it meant, Tamar? It meant that we will never be slaves.”

David made a motion with his hands as if he were patting down soil around a potted plant.

“Let’s not go too quickly, Leah,” he advised. “Moshe didn’t say he would free everyone right away. He just said he had been sent by the Lord.”

Jacob felt relieved. Great-Uncle David was backing him up even before he’d opened his mouth.

“And what he said was completely true, children,” continued their teacher. “Not only Moshe, but everyone in the world was sent here by the One God, because Adonai is our Creator. Does this mean that Moshe can free all of the Israelites? Who knows?”

Leah frowned. David turned to Jacob.

“What did you see?” he asked.

“Uh, I don’t know,” Jacob replied absently. He was still wondering about Avishai. “I guess I sort of saw a rainbow. But then I didn’t want to look anymore.”

“Why not?” Rav David asked.

Jacob was startled by the question. He had to think long and hard.

“Because I didn’t want to know if it would disappear when I looked more closely,” he admitted.

David raised his heavy grey eyebrows. “That’s a very truthful answer, Jacob. And now tell me what’s on your mind. You’re not as focused as usual.”

“I’m worried about Avishai. Abba said he was sick. Bezalel, do you know how he is doing?”

Bezalel looked up from where he had been sketching with a twig in the dirt. “Huh?”

Bezalel was just as bad about drawing all the time as Avishai was about making up songs. Jacob sighed.

David stood up and took his cane. “Let’s find out.”

CHAPTER SIX



When they got to Avishai's house, they saw their classmate lying on a straw pallet in a corner of the back room. Only Miriam was with him.

A big bowl of water was beside her, with a few clean rags floating in it. She was wrapping the cool, wet rags around his calves.

He seemed to glow with fever.

"What happened?" asked Jacob, after the group had greeted Miriam and she had kissed Bezalel, her other grandson. "He was fine yesterday afternoon."

"It came on him in an hour," Miriam said tightly. "I've never seen anything like it."

"Do you think it has anything to do with ... last night?" Leah asked hesitantly.

Jacob snorted. "Why would a meeting give somebody a fever?"

Leah glared at her twin brother furiously.

"How can you talk that way about a miracle?" she demanded.

"Shhh!" admonished Miriam. "I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to leave. Bezalel, you can stay with your cousin if you want. Jacob, you can come back later."

Jacob nodded, and they left.

Jacob and Leah avoided each other's eyes as they all walked back silently at their snail's pace, with Great-Uncle David leaning heavily on his cane.

Suddenly David stopped.

Jacob looked up.

The little group of Israelite schoolchildren and their teacher were surrounded by suspicious-looking Egyptians.

The ruffians looked like they were a few years older than the twins. They seemed to be waiting for someone to start a fight.

"Can I help you?" asked David calmly.

"You think you're stronger than us?" called out the tallest and most muscular Egyptian. "You think your god is greater than our Pharaoh?"

David considered the young man's words with raised eyebrows. Finally he said, "Why would you think I think that?"

"Your Moshe! Your redeemer! Just because his staff can eat up our magicians' staffs, you think you're better than us!"

All the Israelites' eyes widened.

Finally David managed to say, "I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about."

“Come on, Fenuku,” said another one of the youths, one with fewer muscles but a more intelligent expression. “We just heard about it ourselves. Who knows what really happened?”

Fenuku let himself be talked into stepping aside.

The group stood still, stunned.

“Let’s go to the well,” suggested David at last. “That’s where all the gossip comes first. Although I can’t imagine what that Fenuku boy was talking about. Moshe’s staff eating a magician’s staff? That sounds even stranger than a story about one of their gods!”

They heard the loud voices from the well before they even rounded the corner. It seemed like half of Goshen was there, arguing with the other half.

Jacob couldn’t see the raised stone rim around the big circle in the earth, because people were standing on it. He noticed dark-skinned Cushites in their brightly-patterned robes, and Egyptians dressed all in white, standing among the simple brown and tan-colored clothing of the Israelite slaves.

Most of the Egyptians seemed furious. The Israelites stood tall and dignified, and some were talking loudly back.

Many of the Cushites, both men and women, had their arms folded and were listening skeptically.

“And why do all the children and donkeys and goats and sheep have to go with you?” a young Egyptian man, probably a stonecutter or some other skilled laborer by the look of his hands, was shouting at an old Israelite woman.

She had been a slave too long to answer back, but she looked defiantly at the angry Egyptian.

“You all just want to stop working, that’s all. Well, everybody has to work. Me too. You can’t get out of it just because you think you’re special and your god is special.”

At this the old woman’s eyes flashed.

“Our god is God,” she said softly, but with conviction. “He is the One God. He has sent Moshe to take us to celebrate His festival. He is not just part of a crowd, like your gods.”

“Part of a CROWD?!?! How dare you talk about the gods that way!” shouted the Egyptian.

He tried to control himself. “As it is on earth, so is it in heaven,” he explained, hanging onto his temper by a thread. “Everyone here has his task and his path in life, and so do the gods. If there were only one god who had to do everything, there would be nothing but chaos!”

Despite his efforts to remain civil, the Egyptian was turning red. He looked like he was about to strike the old woman.

Then another young Egyptian appeared. His name was Gyasi. Jacob and Leah knew him because he lived a few houses down their street.

“This grandma wasn’t the one who went to Pharaoh to ask for three days’ leave,” said Gyasi soothingly to the other Egyptian. “It’s no use arguing with her. And anyway, Pharaoh said no and his word is law. This will all blow over in a few days if you ignore it.”

The angry young man stared into Gyasi’s mild eyes for a moment. Then he humped, turned on his heel and walked away.

The old woman smiled gratefully at Gyasi, then walked off in the opposite direction. Jacob and Leah came closer, with David and Tamar behind them.

“What’s all this about, Gyasi?” Jacob asked wonderingly. “What on earth happened this morning?”

“Hi Jacob, hi Leah,” Gyasi said. He sounded relieved to see people who weren’t about to hit each other. “I just heard it myself. Some escaped convict named Moshe went right up to Pharaoh when he was about to make a sacrifice at the Nile, and asked that all the Israelite slaves be allowed to go three days’ journey into the desert.”

Great-Uncle David shared a look with his students.

Gyasi continued, “Of course Pharaoh laughed at him. Then Moshe’s brother threw a staff onto the ground and it became a snake. Pharaoh was scared, and his magicians turned their staffs into snakes too, to attack the Israelite snake. But that snake ate up the other snakes, and then became a staff again. The story was all over the palace in minutes.”

“So that’s what Fenuku was talking about,” said David. “The staff didn’t eat other staffs, but all the staffs were turned into snakes.”

“But that’s impossible!” cried Jacob. “How could a staff turn into a snake? Aharon isn’t a magician!”

“He doesn’t need to be,” said Leah. “God gave him a power greater than Pharaoh’s magicians.”

Gyasi looked at her strangely.

Jacob was just about to retort, when the crowd around the well fell quiet.

Everyone turned to look down the broad avenue leading to the well. The people who had been standing on the rim came down and moved away.

“Moshe and Aharon,” breathed Leah.

Aharon looked tall and majestic, with his bald head and light skin. He was walking with the staff Moshe had held the night before. Moshe, although he was shorter, had an aura that was arresting.

That staff in Aharon’s hand created a rainbow in the moonlight and then turned into a snake in the hot sun, Jacob thought.

If it had really done all that. If it wasn’t just imagination and stories.

Moshe and Aharon, the two brothers, looked at each other for a moment. Moshe gave a slight nod.

Aharon climbed up onto the stone rim of the well.

“People of Goshen,” he announced in his sonorous voice. “Pharaoh has hardened his heart and will not let the Israelites go to worship El Shaddai for three days in the desert. Soon plagues will descend on Egypt, such as never have been seen before nor shall ever be seen again.”

Some of the Egyptians, Cushites and others in the throng began talking loudly. They were shushed by the others.

Aharon waited until there was quiet again.

“Those of you who fear God and are friends to the Israelites will be spared,” he said. “But those of you who worship Pharaoh shall know the power of the One God. In the end you will beg Pharaoh to let the Israelites go and you will burden them with your treasures. Choose well now, and live.”

Then he descended from the stone rim. The brothers went on their way.

It was so quiet, despite the crowd of people gathered around the spring, Jacob could hear the running water echoing in the deep below.

CHAPTER SEVEN



That evening, Savta decided the family would have dinner under the fig tree in the garden so they could all discuss the day's events with a bit of privacy. Jacob and Leah helped her bring down the fish stew and the freshly-baked bread from the roof before everyone else arrived.

Usually Caleb and Shelly, who started work earliest and finished first, would wait for Abba to bring over his last load of bricks to the ovens. Then they would all walk home together. Imma and Shoshana could not leave the stables until the Egyptians' horses were fed and locked up for the evening. They would usually arrive after the others, even though the stables were closer to Goshen than the mud pits of Pithom.

But tonight the sun was already low on the horizon, and no one had shown up yet. Savta was getting worried.

Suddenly Shoshana ran into the courtyard, completely out of breath. "Miriam's coming," she gasped after a few seconds. "It's Caleb and Shelly."

Jacob and Leah looked at each other in alarm, and then turned to Savta.

She stood up with a grim expression. "Get water for your sister," she ordered Leah. "Jacob, you pack the biggest loaf of bread and our best figs for Miriam. We'll soon find out what mischief Pharaoh's overseers have been up to this time."

They didn't have to wait long. As Shoshana drank her second long draught from the waterskin and Jacob ran in from the storeroom with the bread and fruit, Abba and Caleb appeared at the courtyard entrance.

Caleb had blood running down his shoulders, sides and legs. He was leaning heavily on Abba.

Right behind him was Shelly, as bloodied as his older brother, being held up by Imma and their Egyptian neighbor Gyasi.

Savta gasped. She had the most fearsome expression on her face that Jacob and Leah had ever seen.

But it only lasted a moment. Then she started barking out orders again.

"Pallets, children! And pillows! Under the fig tree! Shoshana, leave some water for your poor brothers!"

Miriam came in with healing ointments just as Caleb and Shelly were laid carefully down by their parents.

Imma, Savta and Shoshana knew just what to do. They were all experienced with whipping injuries.

But none of them had ever seen the Israelite slaves hurt so badly before.

Caleb and Shelly moaned and winced as Miriam applied the ointments to their cuts.

Abba took Gyasi aside. "Thank you for your help," he said. "If it hadn't been for you, Shelly would have collapsed with his mother on the road."

Gyasi seemed close to tears. "It was the least I could do," he murmured. "Let me know if you need me again."

He looked over to Leah. His eyes burned.

"Hi, Leah," he said, then turned and left.

"What happened?" Jacob finally dared to ask Abba.

The look on Abba's face was dark as a thundercloud. "Moshe," he spat.

Leah took her breath in sharply. How could the savior of the Israelites be responsible for *this*?

Abba glanced at her, and his expression softened slightly.

"Moshe made a mistake," he said. "He went in the morning to ask for three days' leave, as we had all planned last night. But he left when Pharaoh said no."

Abba sighed. "Then Pharaoh issued a decree that the taskmasters should stop delivering straw to the mud pits. Caleb and Shelly and everyone else had to climb out. They had to go to the fields and get the straw themselves, then put it into the mud pits and mix it in."

"They had to go all the way out to the fields?" repeated Jacob. He knew it took a couple of hours, at least, to walk back and forth between Pithom and the wheat fields.

Abba nodded. "But they still had to make the same number of bricks," he growled. "It started to get dark. The taskmasters wanted to go home. But the daily quota hadn't been filled yet. So they just started picking slaves out of the pits and whipping them within an inch of their lives."

"What about the miracle of the snakes?" Leah asked tremulously.

"Out in Pithom, nobody heard about that until later."

Abba looked over at his two oldest sons and clenched his jaw. "If Moshe and Aharon hadn't just walked away when Pharaoh said no, maybe your brothers wouldn't have been hurt so badly."

Leah took her father's hand and stroked it gently. "Abba, this Pharaoh kills babies. I don't think he'd worry too much about whipping Israelite slaves."

Abba sighed. "I suppose you're right."

Jacob's mind was elsewhere.

Twelve days now, he thought.

I wanted to work in the mud pits right after my twelfth birthday, so I could be with Caleb and Shelly. How can I make so many bricks if I have to run around finding straw myself? Will I be whipped as hard as them?

Jacob was ashamed of thinking only of himself when his brothers were suffering so much. But he was very afraid.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

As I wrote ESCAPE FROM GOSHEN, I did a lot of research into how the Ten Plagues might have had natural causes. Some scientists have come up with brilliant theories about what the “blood” in the Nile might have been, and why Egypt might have been completely covered in darkness for a few days. They’ve figured out all the rest of the plagues too, as well as how a large group of people might have been able to cross the Red Sea on foot.

If you are interested in learning more, and you don’t mind reading something with vocabulary that’s a bit harder than this book, you can go to my website: exodus4youngreaders.com, and look at the “Research” page. There’s also a page called “What do YOU think?” that asks a few questions about ESCAPE FROM GOSHEN. On the “Comments” page you can answer those questions or ask others, read what other kids and adults had to say, or just tell me what you thought. I will certainly read everything, although I can’t promise I will answer right away.

I hope you’ll check out exodus4youngreaders.com and leave a comment. There’s nothing that’s more exciting to a writer than hearing from her readers!

Bonnie J. Gordon