

CHAPTER



Tishrei, 3830 - Yavneh

Fire! Fire! Fire!

So much crying! The streets are full of frantic people. Swords flash. Smoke billows. Children scream. Run, run, run! Where to hide? A rush of soldiers.

The baby!

*Where is the baby? In the cellar! Dive back into the alley...
CRASH!*

... Silence.

I am a puddle of sweat and damp blankets, twisted and suffocating. Where am I? A warm sensation trickles across my forehead. I pass my fingers just below the front edge of my kerchief. I wince in pain. My hand comes away red; blood has pooled in my palm. I rub the back of my other hand against the

jutting edge of stone wall where I must have hit my head. As if it's possible, with the feeble swipe of my knuckles, to dull the sharp edge that caused my wound.

I am awake. But the fear still holds me prisoner. The scenes dance before my eyes. I fight my way out of the tangle of wet wool quilting.

Where is the baby?

In the shadowy dark, I feel my way to your cradle. There! Your little chest rises and falls beneath the knitted swaddling cloth. You are alive! I cannot contain my choking sobs as I take you shakily into my arms.

"Penina...?" Shmuel has awoken again. "Another nightmare?"

I nod miserably into the night. He sits up to face me. How many times has this happened this past year? It's already been months since the survivors have arrived with their horrific tales of the Churban. Months that I feel trapped in the grasp of a tight, tense loop of thoughts...of the loved ones we left behind, and what has become of them.

But you, my baby, just sleep, peacefully in my arms. Serene. Your breathing is slow and steady, soft as the Tishrei clouds that I'd see roll over Yerushalayim. Oblivious to the storm that has torn our world apart, shattered it into a million pieces and filled the darkness with scary dreams.

Shmuel sighs.

"Sleep," I urge him despite my pounding heart. "I will be fine." A talmid of the great Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakai, he will be up at the first light of dawn to begin learning. Reluctantly, he turns over and tries to rest. In the silence, I am left with only the stone walls staring back at me. Gray, dark, cold. So unlike the golden Yerushalayim stone we once knew...

I hold you tightly. “We are safe, Menachem,” I murmur. It is more of a cry than a whisper, a prayer more for myself than for you.

I try to take comfort in your very presence, the new life we’ve been gifted with after so much has been lost. Another baby of our own. A small bud peeking through the ice-encrusted earth of a winter storm. But the thoughts keep circling.

Fire! Fire! The Beis Hamikdash, burning before our eyes! The images flash, seared black flames on the inside of my eyelids.

I force my eyes open, tell myself to stop. I look out the window at the weak sliver of the greyish moon, imagining how each day it will grow a little bigger. There is no full moon like the Tishrei moon!

A slight draft slips through the crack under the door, a whiff of the chilly autumn that approaches here in the North, and I cannot help but think ... where would we be now?

Surrounded by thousands being olah leregel, your grandmother and I would be filling our home with never-ending, steaming trays and pots of delicious foods for our orchim, Savta racing to the cellar to bring up another sack of red onions and Sabba relishing the rise and fall of the voices of Torah speakers. Among those would be your own dear Abba, one of the many talmidei chachamim who never ceased to enjoy gracing our brimming table.

I readjust my scarf, remembering the days spent adorning it with colorful stitches of blue and pink, flowers that have now dimmed to tired shades of mauve. Am I the same Penina bas Yosef, daughter of Yerushalayim? It is hard to believe. The faded cloth enwraps my gaunt face, frames the blue of my eyes that are rimmed in dusky black circles.

But there is one thing, at least, that I know is the same, and I grasp at it like my life depends on it. I hold onto the warm chain that quivers with every short breath I take. I follow its links to the flat disc encased in the last circlet—though it is like pitch in the room, and I see nothing, I can feel its ridges; I know the curved shapes of its wheat sheaves by heart. I hold this Hakhel half-shekel from the days of King Aggripas and I remember...

Next year will be Hakhel... ! Oh, how I used to watch them, those mothers and babies, starry-eyed, dreaming of the time that it would be me... Us...

Night lingers on over a still, silent Yavneh and the tears continue to flow. I try not to wake you with my shuddering sobs as I imagine the sun dawning above our golden city and shedding its light through the kitchen window with the view of Har Habayis, reflecting on its great walls and turrets...those mighty stones now but ashes and rubble.

His Palace, His Home, ravaged and abandoned.

We are alive, I chide myself. Praise Hashem! Don't be a kefui tovah. Others were not so fortunate! Reb Yochanan Ben Zakai's deep wisdom has saved our people from complete destruction. There, over the next hill, lies the beautiful Yeshiva established here, away from the crumbling city, where your Abba studies. But the tears continue to flow.

And soon, you stir. A small cry from your little lungs. Do you sense my pain? Holding you close, I begin to sing softly. It is a song of hope, the story we tell each other over and over, to the tune of one of your Savta's lullabies...

The story is told of our brother, it's true



*Who worked in his field, a good, honest Jew
In the blazing hot sun, he pulled and he plowed
Then: for no seeming reason, his ox lowed out loud...*

*An Arab nearby had witnessed the scene,
“Do you see,” he called out, “what it does mean?”
“At this very moment, your Temple’s aflame.
“Jew! Unyoke your cow! Grieve for your pain!”*

*Almost as sudden, in spite of his words
Another deep cry from the ox emerged.
The Arab just nodded, sure as before:
“Re-stake your plow; yoke him once more...”*

*Seeing the surprise in the Jew’s eyes, he said: “Friend!
“It seems there’s yet hope for your people again.
“At this very moment, that you sit to mourn
Moshiach, the comforter, now has been born...*

*As the last moments of night stretch across the horizon, you
drift back into sleep. Through my glazed vision, I swaddle you
again and hold you close to me.*

*Our redeemer is amongst us. Do not despair! We will yet see
the epilogue to this story. Just as we are living proof of your
Sabba’s song: “Ki hem chayenu,” that he would sing to us, over
and over. And now, do you see? It is the Torah that has kept
us alive, and through you, and all the other tinokos shel beis
rabban, our nation will again thrive.*

*A morning crow breaks through the quiet. A new day! Through
the window, I hear the neighboring housewives’ sloshing water
pails, pinging coal shovels, and scratchy broom bristles.*

There is much to do, I urge myself. Getting up to wash, I see the students beginning to fill the winding pathways leading towards Rabbi Yochanan's Yeshiva. Recently, the Chachamim have clarified so many once-disputed halachos; it fills all of us with new vigor. In some way, it seems that after all this suffering, we too have been born anew. The confusion of old fades like a bad memory.

Once again, I think of Hakhel. I will bring the precious coin, so close to my heart, to the third Mikdash that is whole and unscorched, as will Batya and all the other loved ones we lost. The words of our song, "Moshiach, your redeemer!" evoke the picture of a new ruler arising, lifting my heart.

"Hamelech!"

Hashem's anointed is truly holy, a noble king, my child. He is from Malchus Yehuda. Chosen by Hashem, beloved by Hashem, chosen by His people, beloved by His people. Melech Hamoshiach, who will bring the ultimate, perfect integrity to Torah learning, the Jewish nation and Eretz Yisroel!

The words of Yirmiyahu Hanavi, Hashem's promise of an ultimate Hakhel flash suddenly in my mind:

הַנְּנִי מְבִיא אוֹתָם מֵאַרְץ צָפוֹן, וְקִבְּצֵתֵם מֵיִרְכַּתֵי אֶרֶץ.
בָּם עֵנִר, וּפְסִסָּה, הָרָה, וְיִלְדֵת יַחֲדוּ, קָהֵל גָּדוֹל יֵשׁוּבוּ הִנֵּה.

Hashem has promised it all along!

Lifting you from the cradle, I whisper the words to myself, as much as I pass them on to you, my precious one. Guard them. Remember them.

For we will be back.