

ONE



TENTH YEAR OF KING BAHRAM II'S REIGN

• 283 CE •

I recall very well when Abba first came to study with Father. We lived in Kafri at the time, a largish city located on the southernmost tributary of the Euphrates River, whose population consisted almost entirely of Jews. Rami was already a student in our home, which was to be expected since Ahti was betrothed to his brother, Ukva.

Fear has a way of fixing memories strongly in place, and for years afterward my stomach tightened whenever I thought of those nerve-racking days.

I sensed that something was wrong when Mother burst into my and Ahti's *kiton*, our bedroom, while we were still getting dressed. It was not her way to burst in anywhere; Mother's usual entrances were calm and deliberate. Most days I didn't even see Mother until the midday meal, and sometimes not even then since I still had to eat with my brothers' children and their nurses.

"Girl," Mother addressed Ahti's maidservant. "Pack my daughter's things, bedding included, and move them into Pinchas and Beloria's *kiton*." She turned to my nurse and added, "The same for Hisdadukh."

She scowled when the two slaves hesitated. "Move them now, Ahti and Hisdadukh can braid each other's hair."

"But, Mother, Beloria's baby will keep me up all night." Ahti, whose name meant "my sister," was fourteen, almost six years older than me. Yet she whined like a toddler. "Can't I stay with Yenuka?" Yenuka was our

oldest brother, whose wife, Devora, wouldn't be having their baby for several months.

"Devora's sisters and their families will be sharing her *kiton*." Mother's voice was curt. "In fact, relatives will be staying with all your sisters-in-law."

Evidently more people were going to be staying in our room. "Can I sleep on the roof, then?" I asked timidly. I loved nighttime on the roof, with its twinkling stars and cool breezes. I could feel the angels watching over me.

Mother hurried to the door. "Absolutely not. That is where the men will be sleeping." Then she was gone, her jasmine perfume trailing in her wake.

Originally our house only had two floors, like everyone else's, but when my elder brother Keshisha, Mother's seventh son, was born, it became clear that there would be a need for more room once the older ones started families. So Father built a third story on top of the second, making our house one of the tallest in Kafri. Nurse said I could climb to the roof before I could walk, and that she would always find me there whenever I disappeared.

Not that I was always trying to hide from Nurse, rather that the roof was the best place to see what lay beyond our courtyard walls—walls I never passed through except to attend synagogue. From its heights I could watch workers in Father's date groves, merchants and farmers bringing produce to market, shoppers coming and going from the souk, or porters loading and unloading barges on the Hinde Canal. On a clear day I might spy Saracen nomads in the western desert or boats on the Euphrates River in the east. Even during the hottest days of summer, there was usually a breeze.

I sighed with resignation. My connection to the outside world was severed, and who knew when I'd be allowed up there again?

Something was wrong. Just last year our house had overflowed with guests for my brother Pinchas's wedding to Beloria, but this crowding was too sudden, and Mother was clearly not in a celebratory mood. By week's end so many cousins and cousins of cousins had arrived that Mother made all the slaves sleep in the courtyard.

Father soon acquired a number of new students whose homes were far from Kafri: Zeira and Abaye from Pumbedita, Rabbah bar Huna from

Sura, and of course Abba bar Joseph from Machoza. Abba, who at thirteen was just old enough to be obligated to perform mitzvot, was short and wiry, with big eyes, a small chin, and a child's reedy voice. I had only seen a monkey once—when Father took us to visit the exilarch's court for Sukkot, a noble lady there had one as a pet—but Abba immediately reminded me of that monkey. Not that he was bad looking. To the contrary, he was an attractive boy. But he had a restless energy that demanded constant movement, and he seemed to be taking in everything with those big eyes.

Rami, who was slightly younger than my brother Tachlifa, had been studying with Father for years. He was one of the oldest students who wasn't one of my brothers. He was taller than the others too, as tall as Nachman, my second-oldest brother, with a pleasant, resonant voice. Rami's best features were his perfect white teeth and how his face seemed to light up whenever he smiled. Rami was an excellent student, sharper than my brothers, and it seemed to me that he would make a great rabbi. Yet there was a keenness to Abba bar Joseph's questions that made me think he might be more brilliant than any of them.

Nobody would discuss whatever was upsetting everyone, and I was too frightened to ask. Ominous signs were everywhere. Women with worried expressions whispered furtively to one another, only to abruptly separate when I approached. We used to have meat, or at least fish, every day, but now there were days when only the men ate it, and even days when all we had was bread and vegetables. Father always took pride that his family and slaves both ate bread baked from fine wheat flour, but now the slaves' bread was made from coarse flour. And after a while that changed to barley.

I finally found the courage to ask Devora about our finances. Yenuka ran our family's brewery business for Father; that is to say he was responsible for brewing and selling the date beer. But his wife, Devora, was treasurer, keeping the accounts and seeing that bills were paid. I hated to interrupt as she wrote in her ledgers, but she was never alone otherwise.

"Devora." I kept my voice steady. "May I ask a question?"

She looked up in annoyance and my heart sank at the thought that she'd send me away. But instead she sighed and said, "If it's a quick one."

I took a deep breath. "Has Naval attacked our family and chased Nakid away?" Naval was the Demon of Poverty, Nakid the Angel of Sustenance.

“Of course not. Whatever makes you think that?”

“We don’t eat as well as we used to.”

Devora smiled wanly. “Don’t worry, Dada. Nakid is still blessing us, and in fact we are selling more beer than ever. It’s just that there’s less food in the souk to buy these days.” She promptly returned to her work.

Dada was what my siblings called me, all because Keshisha couldn’t pronounce Hisdadukh properly when I was born. I wanted to ask why there was less food, but Devora’s action was a clear dismissal and I slunk away knowing little more than before. I was so frustrated that I grabbed a fly swatter from the kitchen and headed for the garbage pit in the courtyard. In addition to making baskets, Beloria also wove reeds into sturdy devices for killing flies and other noxious insects that served the Corpse Demoness, Nasus.

Fearsome Nasus was responsible for death, decay, and impurity in corpses, excrement, and people—especially women. They said that Nasus took the form of a giant fly, which was why flies were the most reviled among her minions. Killing them decreased the amount of evil in the world, and provided me with an outlet for my aggravation.

As usual, there was a cloud of flies hovering over the pit’s cover. Not as many as around the privies, but swatting flies was sure to disturb whoever might be using them. I took careful aim and, thwack, I brought down three in one blow. I kept at it until I managed to kill six at the same time, and by then I was feeling a little better.

One place I knew I wouldn’t learn anything was during lessons with our tutor. Keshisha had moved up to study with Father two years ago, leaving Ahti and I behind with our nieces and nephews. The curriculum was the same as when I started: reading and writing in both Hebrew and Aramaic, with the Torah as our text, plus some occasional arithmetic. All subjects I had memorized by last year.

Ahti didn’t mind helping the little ones with their learning, but I was so bored that I tried to escape whenever I could. Usually I fled to the roof, but if Grandfather was in the *traklin*, the large room where adults took their meals and Father taught from the Mishna, the compendium of Jewish Oral Law, then I was assured a place either on Grandfather’s lap or on the cushion next to him.

The *traklin* floor was littered with feather-stuffed cushions, so many that every diner, even guests, could have their own. During his classes,

Father's status as teacher meant he sat on three cushions, while his students only got one. Normally Grandfather's position as father-in-law granted him three cushions at meals, but here in class he acquiesced to Father's authority and sat on two.

These days Father was teaching from Tractate Bava Batra, the volume of Mishna that dealt with injuries, damages, and other such complicated legal subjects. Because of all the new students, he began with an explanation of his teaching methods.

"Despite the circumstances, I am pleased to see so many new faces before me. I expect that all of you have studied, and hopefully memorized, the Mishna, even if you're not quite sure what it all means," he said with a smile. "That is our task here, to recite and repeat, and then to discuss and analyze until everyone, including me, understands its meaning."

He paused to let this sink in. "For some of you, what I say next will be new, but do not let it dismay you," he said gently. "In truth, the Mishna does not contain the entirety of Oral Law, which was given to Moses on Mount Sinai along with the written Torah. In addition to those teachings compiled in Mishna, our Sages in Eretz Israel taught many other things. These additional sayings are called Baraita, and though they are outside the Mishna, they are equally authoritative."

One of my nephews called out, "How many Baraita are there?"

Father chuckled. "I don't know, for no scholar has learned them all. But I do know that there are many more Baraita than there are Mishna," he replied. "Those that I and my sons know, we will impart when the subject arises, and I expect you to learn them."

He gazed around the room, locking eyes with Rami, Abaye, Rabbah, Zeira, and Abba in turn. "I implore those of you who have studied with other teachers to share any Baraita you have learned, even if you don't understand them, even if they appear to contradict the Mishna or another Baraita."

"Especially if they appear to contradict the Mishna or another Baraita," my brother Nachman interjected.

Father nodded. "My son is correct, for it is only by a thorough discussion of the reasoning behind the different Mishna and Baraita that we can resolve any apparent contradictions and thus make the law clear," he said. "If you learn how to do this well, the exilarch may appoint you to one of his courts, where it will be your decision that metes out justice."

Since there were no more questions or comments, he continued where

we'd left off the day before. "The Mishna we've been studying deals with various activities that may impinge on neighbors' property rights, some of which are permitted and others prohibited."

The students nodded their readiness to begin. Previously we had learned that it was forbidden to set up a bakery, dye shop, or cattle barn under another's storehouse because the smoke and stink would damage the goods stored above. Today we'd study a section on whether those sharing a courtyard may limit what vocations the other residents could practice there.

I girded myself for what I feared would be a difficult topic.

As always, Father first quoted the Mishna: "No one may restrict another's livelihood by claiming 'I cannot sleep because of his noisy hammer, his noisy millstones, or his noisy children.'"

Then he had the students repeat it with him until he was satisfied that they all knew it. The Mishna was in Hebrew, but everyone here in Bavel spoke Aramaic, so Father next asked who needed any words explained.

This time I understood the Hebrew, since all the words were also in the Torah, but I wouldn't have asked for help in any case. Elohim had commanded us to: "Teach these words diligently to your sons, recite them when you sit in your house and when you walk on the road, when you lie down and when you rise up . . . that your days and the days of your sons may increase." Even though "sons" could also be read as "children," girls were still considered exempt from Torah study. So I sat quietly near Grandfather and avoided drawing attention to my presence.

When nobody had a question, Father sat back, placed his hands on his stout belly, and asked, "We see that carpenters and millers may practice their professions despite the neighbors' objections. But whose occupation is the Mishna referring to by 'noisy children'?"

Rami spoke first. "A teacher, and the noisy children are his students."

My brother Nachman promptly challenged this. "But our Sages taught in a Baraita: If a courtyard resident wishes to become a mohel, a bloodletter, or a teacher of children, the other residents *can* prevent him." He emphasized the word "can." "So the Mishna's noisy children can't be a teacher's students or it would conflict with this Baraita."

One of my nephews asked Nachman to repeat the Baraita, and he did so. Again I understood all the words, but I also knew, despite being a girl and the youngest in class, that a Baraita was not supposed to contradict the Mishna. This was the part of Father's lessons I liked best: when he and his students worked to resolve seeming contradictions.

Abba's hand shot up in protest. "But our Sages mandated that every town must provide teachers for its children. So how can anyone in the courtyard object to a teacher?"

Father's brown eyes warmed with pleasure at his students' vigorous arguments. "Rami is correct. We are indeed discussing teachers here," he said. "Nachman has quoted a teaching from our Sages that allows a courtyard to prevent teachers, while Abba has pointed out that the Sages also require Jewish teachers in every town. So what are we dealing with here?"

Sure that Father would solve the problem, I waited eagerly to see how this would happen.

Abba defended his opinion. "Perhaps the Mishna refers to Jewish children while the Baraita deals with Persian children, students of the Magi. Then we would have no contradiction."

"Yet another Baraita teaches: one who owns a house in a courtyard may not rent it to a mohel, a bloodletter, a Jewish teacher, or a non-Jewish teacher." Rami smiled with pride at how he had refuted Abba.

Father gestured for Rami to repeat the Baraita until everyone learned it. "That is an excellent teaching." He paused as Rami beamed at being praised. "However, the Jewish teacher it refers to is the head teacher of the town, who will have many more people—children, parents, other teachers—going in and out of the courtyard than an ordinary Jewish teacher."

Abba half rose from his cushion, eager to state the resolution he had championed, but Father called on my brother Mari to close the discussion. "So there is no contradiction. The Mishna and Nachman's Baraita refer to different situations," Mari concluded. "The noisy children who must be tolerated in our Mishna are students of a Jewish teacher, while in the Baraita it is a pagan who may be prevented from teaching in the courtyard."

I was still trying to understand the entire argument when I realized that Father hadn't dismissed the class. Instead, he put his arm around me and waited for Rami and Abba to approach. The two students shifted their weight from one leg to the other and looked from Father to me and back to Father again.

Father wasn't angry, yet I was filled with apprehension. I couldn't imagine why I was being singled out in front of the class. Had I done something wrong? Was he going to demand an explanation for my presence or forbid me from returning? And why were Rami and Abba just

standing there in silence instead of showering him with questions? Surely Father wouldn't chastise me in front of his students, or them in front of me. I tried desperately to conquer my dread as I waited for him to speak.

"Hisdadukh." Father's voice was gentle. "Which of these two would you like to marry?"

The silence as everyone awaited my answer pushed hard against my chest, threatening to suffocate me. My throat was so constricted it was all I could do to whisper, "Both of them."

No one was more astounded than I at what I'd said. I was so desperate to escape the scrutiny that followed that I barely heard Abba declare that he wanted to be last.

The next day Grandfather told Mother that he wanted me to study with him rather than with the children's tutor. I'm sure she never would have agreed if I had asked, but she couldn't very well say no to her own father.

Her response was to mutter, "I suppose you would be unwilling to sit with her in Pinchas's class."

My brother Pinchas taught the beginners' Mishna class to my nephews once they'd become proficient in scripture. After a few years memorizing Mishna there, they moved up to study with Father.

Grandfather's bushy gray eyebrows narrowed with such disdain that no answer was necessary.

Mother shook her head in exasperation, but not so hard as to disarrange her dark curls, and at that moment I could see the likeness that marked them as father and daughter. Both had the same narrow jaw and long regal neck, although Grandfather's were slightly obscured by his beard. Nurse said that I shared these features as well.

"I thought not," Mother said. "Still, Hisdadukh must spend two mornings a week with her arithmetic tutor, until she knows multiplication and division."

When he nodded, she turned to me. "There is no reason why you cannot spin flax thread during your new studies."

I held up my spindle and distaff in agreement. Grandfather then walked us to the *kiton* he shared with my nephews—he was too old and they too young to climb three ladders to the roof—and showed me a beautifully bound codex. Unlike a scroll, whose pages were sewn to one another at the sides, the codex pages were all sewn together at one edge, thus making it simple to turn to whatever page one wanted.

He thumbed through it to find his place and handed it to me. “Can you please read aloud from the top of this page?”

It was written in Hebrew, not Aramaic, and it was not from the Torah. “A pool for steeping flax may not be kept near vegetables.” I slowly sounded out the unfamiliar words.

“Continue.” Grandfather gestured to me to go on.

After a few more words, I looked up at Grandfather and smiled. “This is what Father was teaching today, but he didn’t read from a book.”

“Indeed not. My son-in-law knows the entire Mishna by heart.” Grandfather sat down on a cushion next to me. “You will be responsible for ensuring that I still know it too.”

We continued through the second chapter of Bava Batra, with Grandfather reciting and me following along in the codex, correcting him as necessary.

“Nor onions kept near leeks, nor mustard plants near bees,” said Grandfather. “Rabbi Yohanan permits mustard plants.”

I didn’t want to embarrass him, but that wasn’t exactly how the Mishna was written. I knew he would insist on avoiding even the smallest error, so I took a deep breath and corrected him. “Nor leeks kept near onions,” I said slowly. “And Rabbi Yose permits mustard plants, not Rabbi Yohanan.”

To my relief, Grandfather wasn’t angry. He merely repeated the words after me several times before we continued to the next Mishna, which he also remembered somewhat incorrectly. But I patiently supplied the accurate text and continued to do so whenever he stumbled, grateful that Grandfather’s shame at his faltering memory had made him turn to me for help rather than any of the males in our family. As we continued, I fervently thanked Elohim for this incredible opportunity.

Perusing the book later, I again thanked Elohim for providing me with its written text. It would help me remember Father’s lesson afterward, and even better, I could read ahead and see what Mishna he was going to teach next. Studying Mishna was going to be more exciting than learning Torah with my tutor, plus it was a way to spend time with my beloved grandfather.

Despite my studies with Grandfather, I still ate in the kitchen with the young children and their nurses. When Ahti became betrothed to Ukva, the same year Keshisha began studying with Father, they were both

allowed to join our parents, our six older brothers and their wives, plus Father's students, in formal meals. The entire family dined together only on Shabbat.

But it wasn't long before Keshisha was back in the kitchen, teasing me. "Just because Abraham had two wives, Dada thinks she can have two husbands."

Keshisha was only a few years older than me, but nobody would have taken him for my brother. He and Ahti had dark olive skin and a square jaw like Father, while my pale skin and narrow jaw matched Mother's. In addition, they had Mother's prominent nose while mine was nondescript like Father's.

I replied, "Did you come back here to bother me, or do they think you're too childish to eat with the adults?"

"Dada, you have no idea how long and dull the speeches are in there." He gestured toward the *traklin*. "I'll take old Timonus's war stories any day."

Timonus had been Father's slave for over twenty years, starting as door keeper and working his way up to steward. Before that he had been a soldier, and the children, especially the boys, asked again and again about his adventures in the Roman army. He never told the same story twice, or at least not in the same way. I was fascinated with his early years stationed in Jerusalem, where his unit was responsible for preventing Jews from entering the city.

That he had actually stood on such holy ground gave him a special stature in our household, even if he was a slave. But his stories about Jerusalem were never solemn; they usually involved the myriad ways he had acted as guide for those Jews with sufficient funds to bribe him for a look at the ruins of the Holy Temple.

"Jerusalem was the ideal post for a clever soldier," Timonus said. "No danger from an opposing army, and always Jews willing to pay well for a tour of the city."

"We've heard a hundred stories about Jerusalem," Keshisha interrupted. "Tell everyone about the war between Persia and Rome, when King Shapur defeated Valerian and you were captured and sold to Father."

Timonus eyed the roomful of children warily, but his hesitation was overcome by a chorus of encouragement from the other boys. And not just the younger boys, for several of Father's students had joined us—including Abba bar Joseph.

“Eventually my luck ran out and I lost my post in Jerusalem.” Timonus waited to make sure he had everyone’s attention. “But I would have lost that post in any case, for the new emperor, Valerian, ordered the entire legion mobilized for another campaign against Persia. He was determined to regain the territories that King Shapur had conquered and to revenge the humiliating defeat that forced the emperor Philip to pay Shapur over five hundred thousand golden dinars.”

As always, Timonus’s audience gasped in awe at the enormous ransom. The children in my immediate family all knew how our King Shapur had first defeated Rome forty years ago, but perhaps the newcomers did not.

“The stars were lucky for me,” Timonus continued. “My regiment wasn’t called up until after the Persians sacked Syria.

“Emperor Valerian was so furious at how the upstart Persia had triumphed over Rome, mightiest nation in the world, that he accused his generals of incompetence and insisted on leading the next battle personally. He gathered a huge army, seventy thousand strong including myself, and marched us to Edessa to teach Shapur a lesson.”

A nephew waved his arm to get the steward’s attention. “Did you have your own sword or did they give you one?”

“A soldier always has his own armor and sword,” Timonus said firmly. “Along with the others, I was issued a shield and javelin after the army assembled. Nearly all of us were infantry on foot, though we had a small cavalry. However, this time our forces included the elite Praetorian Guards, the emperor’s own bodyguards and the most feared soldiers in Rome.”

He stopped to drink another cup of wine. “Shapur, on the other hand, had only about forty thousand troops, nearly all of them on horseback. Naturally Valerian assumed, as did the rest of us, that Rome’s superior numbers would be decisive. We all looked forward to easy pickings.”

Timonus’s tone made it clear that the Roman assumptions were wrong. “Nobody realized the power of the Persian cavalry. I remember that battle as if it were yesterday. The centurion woke us just before dawn. The air smelled of campfire smoke and the sky was as pink as a harlot’s cheeks. I was worried about my shield since the leather strap had begun to fray, but there was no time to get a replacement.”

Even I, who’d heard this tale many times, leaned forward to hear better. The boys around me sat rapt with attention.

“As usual Valerian deployed us in square formations and marched us straight at the enemy. I was positioned in the middle, but I still had a good view when the Persians sent forward their horse archers, who only inflicted minimal casualties before pulling back.”

Timonus’s eyes shone with excitement, and it seemed to me that he was telling this story with more enthusiasm than usual. “We immediately broke ranks to pursue them, but then, as the archers rode away, I witnessed the most astounding sight. They turned around in their saddles and loosed thousands of arrows at us, all while continuing to ride at full speed. Their accuracy was incredible. All around me men went down, Persian arrows piercing our wooden shields and armor with ease. Thank my lucky stars I wasn’t hit.”

“So the Persians had only been feigning retreat?” A boy asked.

Timonus nodded vigorously. “Not only that, but Shapur had kept the heavy cavalry behind. It was only then, with our casualties mounting, that the Persian cavalry charged. Throwing spears as they rode us down, they cut through the Roman formations like a knife through cheese.”

I could hear the awe in Timonus’s voice as he continued to describe Shapur’s army. “My comrades and I had only short stabbing swords and thin javelins, so we were completely unequipped to fight horsemen swinging maces and long swords. A few of us on the ground tried to use their spears against them, but it was useless. Before we knew it, they had utterly devastated our legion.”

Timonus paused to catch his breath. “The entire seventy-thousand-strong Roman force was slain or captured, while Shapur’s army suffered only mild casualties. Valerian was led away in chains. My lucky stars were still protecting me, however, for I merely suffered a spear wound on my arm instead of one through my belly.”

A student raised his hand. “So how did you enter Rav Hisda’s household?”

“Shapur sent the captured soldiers, including Valerian, to settle new cities in the east,” Timonus replied. “Heaven knows where I would have ended up if I hadn’t gotten dysentery. They abandoned me in Pumbedita, where Master Hisda bought me to be his bodyguard.”

The other boys soon returned to their meal. But when Abba bar Joseph, a far too serious expression on his youthful face, approached our steward, I moved near enough to hear their conversation.

“Does the emperor Carus intend to sack Ctesiphon and its suburbs as retribution for how King Shapur humiliated Valerian?” Abba asked urgently. I recalled maps of Persia our tutor had shown us and realized that Abba’s home city of Machoza was just across the Tigris River from the capital, Ctesiphon.

Timonus looked around in alarm, then put his finger to his lips. “We don’t discuss this in front of the children,” he whispered. “We don’t want to upset them.”

Abba stood where he was, waiting. Finally Timonus gestured for Abba to follow him to the pantry. Desperate for information about the big mystery, I tiptoed along behind them. I couldn’t see them, but I could hear Timonus distinctly.

“If Carus is smart, he’ll sack Ctesiphon while King Bahram and the Persian army are still far away in the east attacking Afghanistan,” he told Abba. “But I doubt the Romans would stay to occupy the capital. They’ll loot and pillage, hoping to escape with their plunder before our soldiers return.”

“What about the people?” Abba’s high-pitched voice rose higher with fear. “Will the Romans enslave everyone like they did when they destroyed Jerusalem?”

Poor Abba. He must have been afraid for his home and family. My heart began to pound as I realized that my home and family in Kafri might also be in danger.

“That would take too much time, and the Persian army could easily overtake them,” Timonus assured him. “Remember that the Romans are on foot while the Persians are on horseback.”

Abba might be reassured by this, but I was not.

“You know the city guards,” Abba said. “Have you heard how far the Romans have come?”

I held my breath, both impatient and terrified to hear Timonus’s answer.

“Apparently Carus was at Pumbedita a few weeks ago, and they promptly surrendered when he offered to spare the inhabitants, most of whom had already fled. Though his men stripped the surrounding fields and orchards of their produce, it seems that the city wasn’t pillaged too badly. The Romans can expect far richer plunder in the capital.”

I could hear Abba’s gasp, followed by the sounds of muffled crying. Tears ran down my own cheeks, but I remained quiet.

“Do you want me to continue?” Timonus asked. “There’s not much more to tell.”

Abba blew his nose and must have nodded, because Timonus continued, “There are rumors that Carus reached Nehardea and that his army is still trying to breach the city walls. Others say that the Persian cavalry is less than a week away, so Carus immediately sent his soldiers on to Ctesiphon rather than attempt a lengthy siege.”

My throat tightened. If a week passed before King Bahram and his men returned, the Romans could have enough time to sack the twin cities.

“So our army might arrive first?” Abba suggested, clearly more optimistic **that** I was. “Until I hear otherwise, I shall pray diligently for it.”

If I had waited for Timonus to reply, he and Abba would have caught me eavesdropping. But I’d heard more than enough to explain the many people staying with us, the shortage of food, and the heavy undercurrent of anxiety in our household.

Ha-Elohim! The Roman army was attacking Persia and very likely, the most populous Babylonian Jewish communities were either destroyed or about to be. If King Bahram were delayed, Carus would surely attack Sura, where Rami’s family lived, once he was done pillaging Machoza and Ctesiphon.

And Kafri was only a few hours downstream of Sura via the Euphrates River.