



NETANYAHU

A COLD WIND HOWLED around the corners of the building and rumbled across the eaves but Ben-Zion Lurie paid it no attention. Seated at his desk, his head was bent over an ancient Torah scroll. Lurie's eyes were focused on the text, his mind on Jerusalem and the days of the Ancients when the words he read were first committed to paper more than two thousand years earlier.

As the wind continued to blow outside, a draft swept through the room. Lurie gathered his cloak tighter around his body and tucked his hands beneath the folds of the fabric, giving them the benefit of a moment's warmth before extracting them again to jot a note on the pad that lay in his lap or to wind the spindle and advance the scroll as he read.

It was the winter of 1878, in the city of Lodz, today a metropolitan area in Poland. Back then, it was part of the Russian Empire and situated in the northwestern section of a region known as the Pale of Settlement, a zone that stretched northward from Odessa at the Black Sea and spread to the west, reaching as far as the Prussian border. It was the only portion of the Russian Empire in which Jews could legally live as permanent residents and, as a result, was home to more than four million kinsmen. Ben-Zion Lurie served the Jews of Lodz as a rabbi at the Beth Jacob Synagogue.

About mid-morning, the sound of shuffling feet caught Lurie's attention and he looked up to see an elderly man standing in the doorway. His long white hair hung in strands from beneath his kippah and he had a full gray beard that reached to his chest. He was disheveled, and poorly kept, but Lurie recognized him at once as Judah Alkalai, the Rabbi of Semlin. One of the most influential rabbis in all of Judaism, Alkalai was a man of impeccable reputation and one of the earliest advocates for Zionism—the return of the Jews to their historic homeland in Palestine.

Known as a strong and persistent advocate of the Jewish cause, Lurie was struck that day by how frail Alkalai appeared. His eyes were sunk deep into their sockets and ringed by dark circles. The skin along his cheekbones seemed thin and tightly stretched. Still, he was a man who commanded the deepest respect and Lurie pushed himself up from his chair.

“Rabbi Alkalai. It is an honor to receive you.” Alkalai did not reply but came through the doorway and walked with halting steps toward Lurie's desk. As he drew nearer, Lurie was all but certain the man must be dying.

Alkalai collapsed in a chair opposite the desk, folded his robe around his legs and gathered it over his torso, then looked up at Lurie. “You are the heir of the House of David.”

Lurie nodded slowly, unsure where the conversation was going. Of all the Jewish families in the world, the House of Lurie was the one remaining family with an indisputable, uncontested, unbroken line of descent from David, King of Israel, to the present, but theirs had been no easy life.

Cast out of Palestine, first by the Romans then by the Arabs, family members were scattered far and wide across Europe, but in each successive generation they gathered to designate one of their members as the child of the promise, the family heir, the one through whom the Davidic line would continue. The one who would ascend to David's throne as king.

Lurie recalled the family ceremony in which he had received that

title. His father and brothers in the room with relatives from Spain, Germany, France, and Russia—most of them men he'd never seen before. The robe and scepter they gave him. The way they knelt when he stood and bowed their heads when he passed. It had been an exhilarating moment, but no one in the family expected the Davidic Kingdom would ever again become a political reality.

“You are the Anointed One,” Alkalai continued. “The one through whom the Promise of God passes to subsequent generations.”

Lurie smiled. “The title has been largely honorific. Important to us but it has little meaning or influence outside our family.”

Alkalai seemed unfazed. “The things that are meaningless to man are often the most important to God.”

“I agree,” Lurie replied with a hint of impatience. “But how may I be of service to you?”

The faintest glimpse of a smile flickered through Alkalai's eyes. “It is I who should ask that of you.”

“Has something happened?”

“The time of fulfillment is drawing near,” Alkalai answered.

Lurie was puzzled. “If you mean the return of the Davidic Kingdom as a political reality, I think we are a long way from that.”

“Not so far as you think.”

“And how so?”

Alkalai seemed to ignore the question and adjusted his position in the chair. “Before long, your wife will give birth to a daughter. You must name your daughter Sarah. When she is of age she will meet a man named Nathaniel. They will marry. And after two years, they will have a son.” He reached into his bag and took out a signet ring which he held between the fingers of his right hand. “You must give this to your grandson.” Alkalai leaned forward, his hand outstretched, and offered the ring to Lurie. “The Promise will go to him.”

Lurie took the ring and studied it a moment. “There seems to be something written here,” he said, pointing to the shoulder of the ring. “A phrase of some kind, I think.”

Alkalai nodded. “Can you read it?”

Lurie squinted. "It says, 'Netanyahu Ben-Yoash.'" He glanced over at Alkalai. "That's someone's name. Netanyahu. Son of Yoash."

"That ring was the official seal of your ancestor, King David."

Lurie arched an eyebrow as he read the inscription once more. "Netanyahu. 'Yahweh has given.'" He looked up at Alkalai again. "They used to tell us it was an official's name but my father said it was a reference to David."

"Could be either, I suppose. But I think it's more likely an inscription to the king."

"Why do you have it?"

"It was in another line of your family," Alkalai explained.

"Yes," Lurie nodded. "Jacob's line. My great-great-uncle or something like that. He died before I was born. There was a dispute about who should have it and so they kept it. Which is why there was no ring when I was named."

"Yes, but things have changed and Jacob's family members have been at a loss to know who should have the ring. They passed it to me for safekeeping."

Lurie thought again. "Jacob had a child by a woman he met. Before he was married. Last I heard, his descendants were doing well."

"And that was the origin of the dispute," Alkalai added. "But now—"

"You mean, a question of his legitimacy and whether he should be counted as a family member."

"Yes, but that no longer matters," Alkalai explained. "His last male descendant died two months ago." Alkalai pushed himself up from the chair and stood. "And the dispute died with him. Their line of the family has come to an end and the promise has passed to you without reservation. Give the ring to your grandson. He will take his place among the Netanyahus—men given to us by Yahweh."

Lurie stood as well. "My grandson will become king?"

"That is not for us to say. We only know that he will be the child of the promise."

Lurie gestured with the ring. "Then what is he to do with this?"

"When the time comes, he will know what to do."

“You are certain of this?”

Alkalai turned toward the door. “The ring follows the promise,” he said over his shoulder. “No one can stop it. No one can take it where it does not want to go.”



Meanwhile, about that same time in Istanbul, five men gathered in a nondescript three-story house situated at the end of a narrow alley not far from the bazaar. Barakat, Abdullah, and Talal from the house of Hassan, Musa and Idris from the house of Hussein.

Known collectively as the Al-khulafā’ Ar-rāshidūn—the Rightly Guided Caliphs, or by the shorter version, the Rashidun—they were an obscure, all-but-unknown group of designated male descendants of the Muslim prophet Muhammad, who for twelve hundred years ruled Islam, imposing order across all factional lines, governing Sunni and Shia alike, as well as many smaller sects, keeping inter-Islamic hostility to a minimum and directing the worldwide spread of Islam by all allowable means.

As Ibrahim al-Kazem entered the room that day he found the caliphs seated in overstuffed chairs arranged in a semicircle. An empty wooden straight-backed chair positioned in their midst awaited him.

In his public job, Ibrahim was a commodities broker and commercial facilitator who represented Arab businesses in Istanbul to European interests in Odessa, assisting them in conducting trade in both directions up and down the Black Sea. Working between the parties, Ibrahim connected Turk and Arab interests to non-Arab merchants, bankers, and shippers in Russia and other major countries. His services provided a vital link between those operating under Islamic law and those operating under Western law and gave him unique and far-reaching relationships with influential people in both regions. Because of those relationships, he had been recruited by the caliphs to use his business position and the access it afforded to represent Rashidun priorities, acting as their facilitator in exerting Muslim influence in the West, particularly in the Russian Empire.

“We continue to hear reports about the Jews,” Barakat began. “Particularly those living in Russia.”

“They say many things,” Ibrahim replied. “But thus far they have done very little but talk.”

“But the subject of that talk is our point,” Abdullah noted. “Their increased talk of Jewish nationalism is quite troubling to us.”

“The Russians will never let them establish a state of their own.”

“Perhaps not in Europe,” Musa noted. “But in Palestine the Russians are impotent to do anything.” His eyes bore in on Ibrahim. “And that is our concern.”

“Well, I don’t think—”

Talal interrupted. “We hear of men like Yitzchak Reines and Yehuda Berlin. These are serious men, right?”

“Yes,” Ibrahim answered. “They are serious men.”

“And you know of these men?”

“Yes,” Ibrahim said once more. “Of course.”

“And you do not think we have good reason to be concerned?”

“Reason,” Ibrahim shrugged, “but as many wish to stay where they are as want to leave. Successful men. Well established where they are. Content to indulge in the lifestyle their success affords.”

Barakat spoke up. “You have helped us establish ties to the Romanov family.”

Ibrahim nodded. “Ties with key members of the ruling family in the Russian Empire.”

“We feel that now it is the time to reap some reward from those relationships.”

“And what would you like for me to do?”

“Curb Jewish ambition,” Barakat explained. “Before it becomes a problem.”

“It already is a problem,” Talal suggested.

“Before it gets out of control,” Barakat added.

“We can’t have them trekking back to Palestine.” A frown wrinkled Musa’s forehead as he spoke. “That would be far too dangerous. Worse even than the Christian crusaders who pillaged the homes of our

ancestors. If the Jews return to Palestine, they will never leave. They will re-establish a Jewish political state and be a thorn in our side until the end of the age.”

“And flaunt their Jewish practices,” someone said.

“Desecrate the Holy Mount,” Talal added.

“Our people are living there now,” Barakat said, attempting to move the conversation forward. “But we have not enough people to exert control over the entire region. And the Sultans here in Istanbul are weak.”

“Turks,” someone grumbled. “We never should have trusted those non-Arab interlopers.”

Barakat looked over at Ibrahim. “You have contacts with organizations loyal to the czar? Beyond members of the royal family?”

“Yes,” Ibrahim replied. “Several. We have discussed this many times.”

“And those organizations are prepared to increase their activities against the Jews?”

“Waiting for the opportunity.”

“Good. We would like for you to give them that opportunity.”

“Should I—”

Barakat cut him off. “We do not want to know the details. How you accomplish the goal will be up to you.” He folded his hands in his lap and leaned forward. “But we very much want to see results. You understand us?”

Ibrahim nodded. “I understand.”