

The SECRET TUNNEL

During the time of King Chizkiyahu, dark days lay ahead for Yonatan and the Jews of Yerushalayim.

The wicked King of Ashur, Sancheriv, was about to surround the city. The enemy could easily win by simply blocking off the water supply of the Jews.

As the danger grew closer, Yonatan resolved to help protect his family, his city and his people.

Cover illustration and design
by Adam Komosinski



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Written and Illustrated by
Joy Nelkin Wieder

*For my husband,
Scott (Shlomo ben Moshe v' Ruchel), with love.
–Joy (Simcha Deena bat Nutah v' Sarah)*

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PJ Our Way edition printed 2024

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HACHAI PUBLISHING
Brooklyn, New York
Tel 718-633-0100 Fax 718-633-0103
www.hachai.com – info@hachai.com

Printed in China



Chapter One
The Stranger

“I got you!” Yonatan shouted, pointing a stick at his little brother, Eli. His dark eyes flashed. “Give up, soldier of Ashur!”

Eli showed his teeth. “I won’t!” The two brothers clashed swords. Eli’s sandals slapped against the stones of the courtyard.

“I am Gilad, fiercest warrior in all Yehudah,” yelled Yonatan. He pretended to be his big brother, Gilad, who was a soldier in the king’s army. Yonatan looked up to his big brother. He wanted to do everything Gilad did.

Yonatan bumped his stick against Eli’s, but the stick slipped. It scraped across his little brother’s arm. Eli dropped his stick-sword and began to cry.

“I’m sorry,” said Yonatan.

Eli only cried louder. “Imma, Yoni hurt me!” He scurried to the back of the house. His mother and older sister, Miriam, were preparing the evening meal in the kitchen.

“Yoni, don’t play so roughly with your little brother,” called Imma.

“I didn’t mean to hurt him,” Yonatan protested. “And please don’t call me Yoni... that’s a baby name.”

“If you want to be treated like a grown-up, you must first act like a grown-up,” Imma replied. “Put away your ‘swords’ and wash up. Your father will be home soon.”

Yonatan picked up the two sticks, grumbling. “Why do I have to do all the chores?” After all, Eli only had a little scratch. He could help, too.

Yonatan took the sticks to the store-room next to the kitchen. Then he grabbed an urn of water from the table. Eli crossed his eyes and made a face as Yonatan poured the water into a large bowl. Yonatan scowled at his little brother.

“Imma, the boys are teasing each other,” tattled Miriam. She pushed waves of long brown hair back under her scarf.

Imma stopped stirring the soup. Before she could reply, the front door creaked open.

“A hardworking quarryman is home for his supper,” called a booming voice.

“Abba!” cried Eli. He raced across the courtyard and jumped into his father’s arms.

“That’s a fine greeting,” said Abba, laughing.

Yonatan wished he could jump into Abba’s arms, too, but he had outgrown such childish behavior. After all, he was eleven!

“Shalom, Abba,” Yonatan said in his most grown-up manner.

“Shalom, son,” answered Abba.

“Supper is almost ready,” called Imma.

Yonatan followed Abba and Eli into the kitchen. “It smells wonderful, Tamar,” said Abba.

“Thank you, Tishbi,” said Imma. “You’ll just have time to clean up.”

Using the basin filled with water, Abba washed the stone dust from his face and hands. The water turned as gray and gritty as a sandstorm in the desert.

“Please clean this bowl, Yoni,” said Abba, handing it to Yonatan.

More chores! Yonatan lugged the basin to the waste drain, a hole lined with clay pipes. He whispered under his breath, “I hope Abba will stop calling me Yoni... I’ve got to make him see that I’m almost grown up!”

Yonatan wiped the basin dry with a soft lambskin and handed it to his father. Abba, Imma, and the children poured water over their hands and recited the bracha. Then they returned to the courtyard.

Miriam pulled the couch into the center of the open square. Yonatan and Eli removed the pillows to sit on the ground. Abba sat on the couch. Yonatan looked up

to the sky above their heads. The sun had set and the moon was on the rise.

Imma brought out a large bowl of broth made from seasoned lentils. She placed it in front of Abba, then sat down next to him. Miriam handed her father fresh, hot pita bread. She sat on the floor next to Eli. Everyone recited the bracha, and the family began their meal. Just then, there was a loud knock on the door.

“Who could that be?” asked Yonatan.

Miriam quickly lit an oil lamp. She crossed the courtyard, her shape outlined in the moonlight. When she opened the door, a stooped figure hovered in the shadows.

“Please, young lady, a piece of bread for a hungry old man,” said a low voice.

Miriam turned to look at her parents. Imma nodded her head.

“Come in, sir,” she said. “You may share our supper.”

Miriam offered to wash the dust off his feet, but the stranger hobbled past her. Leaning heavily on a staff, the beggar slowly lowered himself next to Yonatan. The hood of his cloak cast deep shadows on his face.

Where had he seen this stranger before? wondered Yonatan.

Imma motioned for the man to wash his hands, then handed him a piece of bread and a bowl of soup. It was a mitzvah to feed the poor. Imma always welcomed anyone in need of food or shelter.

“Thank you,” said the stranger. He dipped the bread in the soup. Yonatan noticed a jagged scar across the back of his hand. His brother, Gilad, had a scar just like that.

Suddenly, Yonatan realized that this was no beggar. He jumped up and reached for the man’s hood.



“Yonatan!” gasped Imma. “Respect your elders!”

“This is no old man,” said Yonatan. “It’s Gilad!” He pulled back the hood to reveal his brother’s smiling face.

“I can’t fool you, little brother,” said Gilad. He pulled Yonatan down to the ground. Yonatan laughed. He was so happy

to see his brother! Gilad had been gone a long time.

Eli squealed in delight. He jumped on his big brother's back. Imma, Abba and Miriam laughed as the three boys rolled across the courtyard.

"You sure tricked us," said Abba. "Why are you dressed like a beggar?"

"It's my disguise! I went to the north as a spy for the king," said Gilad.

"A spy!" cried Eli.

Gilad nodded. "I just reported to the king's advisors on the strength of Ashur's army."

"What did you tell them?" asked Imma.

Gilad took a deep breath. His voice became very serious. "There are at least eighty thousand armored soldiers, sixty thousand archers, and several regiments of chariots and horsemen."

“That’s big enough to conquer the whole world!” exclaimed Yonatan.

“That’s just what King Sancheriv wants to do,” said Gilad. “But first he’s coming to conquer Yehudah. He has a powerful new weapon called a siege machine. It’s like a tower on wheels with a huge pole sticking out the front.”

“What does it do?” asked Yonatan.

“Archers on top of the tower shoot arrows through a slit. Soldiers inside the machine bang the long pole into a city’s walls. Even thick, stone walls crumble under the force of Sancheriv’s siege machines. The army of Ashur is working its way down the coast toward Yerushalayim. We only have a few months to prepare for a siege.”

“What’s a siege?” asked Eli.

“Don’t you know anything?” asked Yonatan. “A siege is when an army

surrounds the city walls. Nothing can go in or out, not even food or water.”

“Nothing to eat or drink?” cried Eli.

“Don’t worry,” said Gilad. “King Chizkiyahu has a plan. The blacksmiths will work day and night to stockpile weapons. The stonemasons will rebuild the walls. And the quarrymen will dig a tunnel to the Gichon Spring for fresh water.”

“I can help dig the tunnel,” said Abba.

“Yes, Abba,” said Gilad. “The king’s advisor, Shevna, said that you are needed at once.”

Yonatan felt a glow of pride. Even the king’s advisor knew that Abba was one of the best quarrymen in the city!

“Will we have to crawl through the tunnel to get the water?” asked Eli.

“No, little brother. Workers will dig a large pool inside the city walls to hold the water,” answered Gilad.

Eli nodded his head. “King Chizkiyahu is clever!”

“With Sancheriv’s army practically at our gates, we must work as quickly as possible,” Gilad continued. “To speed up the project, the tunnel will be mined from opposite ends. One team of men will start digging from the spring and another from inside the city.”

“How will the two teams connect?” asked Abba.

“The king’s engineers have taken careful measurements,” answered Gilad.

“Nothing like this has ever been tried before!” Abba declared.

“These are desperate times, Abba. You are to report at dawn tomorrow. It sounds like a long and difficult job.”

“I am honored to be of service,” answered Abba.

After Gilad left, the boys prepared for

bed. Yonatan was sad to see Gilad leave, but he knew that his brother had to return to the army. Eli and Yonatan unrolled their mats and laid them on the bare floor. After they recited “Shema,” Abba came upstairs to say goodnight.

“Will the army of Ashur really come to Yerushalayim?” asked Eli, trembling.

“I’m afraid so, little one,” answered Abba. “King Sancheriv won’t rest until the whole world is under his control.”

“What will happen to us?” asked Yonatan.

“Don’t worry,” answered Abba. “Hashem will surely protect us.”

