

The Dovekeepers Study Guide

The Dovekeepers by Alice Hoffman

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Plot Summary

The story of the last Zealot stronghold in Judea is told from the point of view of four fictional women in the novel "The Dovekeepers" by Alice Hoffman. The novel focuses on the lives of four very different women who took refuge at Masada. These women formed bonds as they worked together caring for the doves whose wastes were used for fertilizer at the fortification. The novel follows the historical story of the fortification but uses fictional characters. Themes in the novel include the importance of religion, the symbol of the lion, and the relationships bonded between the women.

One of the main women featured in the novel is Yael. Yael was the daughter of a Sicarii assassin whose mother died giving birth to Yael. For this reason, and because Yael's red hair reminded him of her mother, Yael's father had always hated her and blamed her for her mother's death. After the Romans took their house for their own use, Yael and her father escaped to the desert where they were joined by Ben Simon and his wife and family. Ben Simon romanced Yael and the two had an ongoing affair. While in the desert, Ben Simon and his family got sick with a fever. Even though Yael and her father tried to find a cure, they were unsuccessful. Soon after the deaths of Ben Simon and his family, warriors from Masada found Yael and her father. Amram, Yael's brother, had sent the warriors to bring them to Masada. Yael arrived at Masada pregnant with Ben Simon's child and haunted by the ghost of his wife, Sia, who'd tried to be friends with Yael.

Revka had arrived at Masada before Yael did. Her husband, a baker, was killed when Romans invaded their village in the Valley of Cypresses. Revka, her daughter, grandsons, and son-in-law fled to the desert. While camping at an oasis, Revka's daughter was attacked by Roman soldiers while Yoav, Revka's son-in-law, was in the desert praying. Revka hid her grandsons and tried to protect her daughter but was knocked out by the soldiers. She awoke to find her daughter had been raped and tortured by the Romans. Zara's wounds were fatal and her mother put her out of her misery by slitting her throat. Her grandsons had lost their voices because of what they had seen. Revka killed the Roman soldiers by baking them bread laced with hemlock. Revka arrived at Masada mourning for her daughter and guilt ridden because she had committed murder.

Shirah and her daughter Aziza are also featured in the novel. Shirah, a kedishah, was believed to have taken refuge at Masada because she was the cousin of Ben Ya'ir. In reality, she and Ben Ya'ir had been having an affair for years. Aziza was Ben Ya'ir's daughter. Shirah's character is important because as a kedishah she often showed more compassion for the people around her and their sins than the religious leaders.

Aziza, meanwhile, had an interesting background as her mother had once changed the girl's name and dress to make her appear to be a boy. This happened after Shirah and Aziza were attacked by bandits. Shirah did not want her daughter to feel the same helplessness she had because she was female. After Aziza had been masquerading as a boy for several years, Shirah had her daughter change back into a girl when they went



to live at Masada. To save her brother, Aziza, who was actually the better warrior, took Adir's place as a warrior.

At the fortification, the four women bond because they worked together at the dovecotes, which were homes for pigeons. Although Revka had not liked Yael at first, she wound up taking Yael into her house after Yael's father hit her during an altercation about her pregnancy. Aziza did not like Yael at first because she felt the more capable woman was taking her place as Shirah's daughter. As they worked together, however, Aziza and Yael formed a bond like that between sisters. Shirah also revealed she had been Yael's nursemaid when Yael was just a baby. She'd recognized Yael when she first came to Masada and for that reason had requested the girl work in the dovecotes.

The day the Romans breached the wall at Masada, there were only seven survivors among the nearly one thousand people who sacrificed themselves to keep the Romans from declaring a victory. In a step of faith, Yael told the Roman general she was Shirah, Ben Ya'ir's closest companion and that she would tell the story of Masada in exchange for her life, and the lives of Revka and the five children with them. After their stories were told, the five went to live in Alexandria where Yael was known as the Witch of Moab, carrying on Shirah's practice of keshaphim.



Part 1 (Yael): Pages 1-42

Summary

The narrator speaks of following her father out of Jerusalem after the fall of that city. They went into the desert where they wandered and lived like nomads. She felt she left behind all the good things life might have had in store for her when she left Jerusalem but she had no choice but to leave because it was her fate.

The narrator describes the building and destruction of the first temple, then the rebuilding of the temple. That temple had stood for hundreds of years, but the Romans were attacking Jerusalem and the Jews. The narrator writes she expected nothing but disaster as she was born in the month of Av, the month of destruction. Her mother died in childbirth and the narrator was born alive only because she was cut from her mother's womb. She was born with red hair and red freckles. She dreamed of lions, particularly one she fed from her hand which, in turn, ate her alive.

Even as the Romans attacked the city and the temple, the Jews fought among themselves. The priests sided with the Romans. Those people who argued with the priests were considered robbers and thugs, the narrator's father included. The Romans defiled the temple by planting their flag with the symbol of a boar on it, and then killing roosters outside the house of worship. A star that looked like a sword appeared over the city, which the narrator said people believed was a bad omen. Soon Roman soldiers began killing the residents, on the night referred to as the Plague upon Innocence many people were killed with those who weren't killed fleeing the city.

The narrator reveals her name was Yael. She hated her name because it was the same as her mother's. Her father hated her because her mother had died in childbirth. He considered her a murderer. Her mother's family insisted Yael have a nursemaid but the girl, who was young enough to be Yael's sister, was sent away when Yael was still small. The nursemaid left Yael with a pomegranate for luck. Yael slept and was often left alone in a hallway while her brother and father talked and ate together. One day her father chided her for crying, telling her that was probably what killed her mother. When Yael spoke back to him, telling him she wasn't the sole cause of her mother's death she realized by her father's reaction that he, too, felt responsible for his wife's death but wanted to blame only his daughter. At this point, Yael decided to be dutiful and take the responsibility for her mother's death, but she made a promise to herself she would never cry again.

As Yael grew older she learned her father was a member of the Sicarii, zealots who killed the men who refused to fight the Romans as well as the priests who allowed the Romans to sacrifice at the Jewish temple. He had killed too many men to count and possessed a cloak that made him seem invisible. He was also skillful in entering a room like a shadow and killing his victim before that man knew what had happened. Yael was unhappy when her brother followed in her father's ways. She begged him to reconsider



but was unable to convince him. She bought him a charm of protection, a silver amulet imprinted with the image of Solomon fighting a dragon. Amram, Yael's brother, was soon a better assassin than their father. His teacher was Jachim ben Simon. Amram's gift was that of disguise. His friends gave him the nickname "Hol," the name of the phoenix. Yael believes that because of her father and brother's profession, no man in Jerusalem would have wanted her as his wife.

Because of his success, Amram was soon wanted by the Roman soldiers. Amram soon had to leave Jerusalem and seek refuge in a desert fortification. He gave Yael a blue silk scarf as a farewell present. Even after most Jews had already left Jerusalem, Yael's father said they had to stay because he had work to do. They left only after the Romans took over their home for their own use. They left with the family of Jachim ben Simon. The group included Ben Simon's wife, Sia, and their two sons. Sia befriended Yael during their journey out of Jerusalem.

Yael overheard the men saying that they were taking what was known as the route of the doomed to the Salt Sea, hoping to find Zealots and their fortresses. Yael went that night to an old well that no longer held any water. She strained the mud she found there through her fingers and her scarf to get the water out. When she finished her task, she realized Ben Simon had been watching her. She believed this was the first step on her road to sin.

Even though it was a sin for her to harm herself, Yael kept track of the days since they'd left Jerusalem by cutting notches in her leg. She became more aware of Ben Simon watching her intently and realized she wasn't invisible to him. After her monthly period, she went to a small pool to cleanse herself and was surprised a rustling and footfalls in the trees. Back at camp he warned her going to the pool was dangerous. It was on their 21st day in the desert that Ben Simon came to her. He ran his hand along her leg, telling her he'd noticed she wasn't like other women.

When the heat dried up the water in their first camp spot, the group moved on looking for water. They traveled in the early morning when it wasn't as hot. They drank any water they could find, even if it was unclean. They became so hungry they killed the donkey and ate its meat. Yael felt as if they were going backward, becoming like barbarians. These barbarians were dangerous. Yael remembered Ben Simon had found a pair of dead sister brides who appeared to have tried to run away from their new husband. Ben Simon showed Yael these dead girls laying side by side as if to tell her he would protect her and care for her. He had tears in his eyes as he buried the girls.

Ben Simon came to Yael in the cave one night. He had sex with her. She did not resist. She asked him only about the scar on his face. He said it had been made by a lion. Ben Simon had been taken for training as a Roman gladiator. As a test he and ten men were locked in a room with the lion. The lion killed the nine other men but only scratched Ben Simon across the face before falling down dead. Ben Simon had escaped in the Romans' confusion after the odd killing. He told Yael that one of the men killed was his brother.



Analysis

The first thing to note about this novel is that it is a work of historical fiction. The story of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem as well as the flight of many Jews into the desert is based on historical facts. The specific characters and their circumstances are created by the author as she tells what life might have been like for women as they fled to safety with their families. This first section of the novel takes place in the summer of 70 C.E. The date abbreviation C.E. indicates Common Era, the same as the more commonly used A.D. Notice the way in which the author presents a very sensual picture of Yael's experiences. She not only tells what has happened to the girl but also how the situations made her feel. The author describes the smoke from the temple, what it looked like, what it smelled like. Yael says she felt as if she were breathing in a stone structure intended to last forever. She even tells what she's learned from her experiences as she indicates that she realizes that even stone doesn't last forever but can easily be turned to dust.

Notice that even though these Jews are highly religious, they believed strongly in fate and omens. The people believed that the story of their lives had already been written down and there was nothing they could do to change their fates. Yael indicates that her fate "walked with me" (p. 1) and that there was nothing she could do to stop what life had in store for her. Notice in the quote, the author personifies fate, giving it a personality of its own and bringing it to life. These words make it appear that one's fate is like a person he can't leave behind. Meanwhile, Yael reports that she dreamed constantly of a lion. She believed this beast was her destiny. It appears the image of the lion of which she dreamed was used to represent Ben Simon, the man who bore a scar on his face from a lion. Yael felt this lion was her destiny. She believed there was nothing she could do to resist being figuratively "eaten" by the lion. The lion is a very important symbol in the novel and constitutes one of themes of the story.

The people also believed in omens. These omens could be either naturally occurring phenomena or unusual circumstances, each of which was interpreted by the people to be either good or bad fortune. For instance, the people believed the star shaped like a sword that appeared in the sky before the complete destruction of the temple was a bad omen. When Yael tried to talk her brother out of becoming an assassin she pulled him beneath a flame tree to talk to him, believing that he would understand the tree represented fire, a bad omen for the path he was taking with his life. Meanwhile, Sia had believed it was a good omen for them to find a citrus tree on the first night of their journey out of Jerusalem. Although she didn't contradict the older woman, Yael writes that she knew the tree that bore bitter citrus fruit was a forewarning of the bitter trials they would face in the desert.

Another theme that is of major importance in the novel is that of the relationships between women as well as the relationships between women and men. Notice that up to the point that Sia befriended her, Yael really had no mother figure. She'd had a nanny for a short while, but this girl was barely older than Yael, according to the novel, and was sent away just a short time after she was hired. Yael's father told her when she was



barely old enough to understand that she was responsible for the death of her mother. For this reason, Yael considered herself a murderer even though she held her father partially responsible for her mother's death for the simple reason that he took part in helping to create Yael, the cause of death, if nothing else. The narrator writes of Yael's decision to take on the responsibility of her mother's death as being that of a dutiful daughter. The culture and time period in which she was born gave her no option but to take upon herself the crimes of which her father accused her. Her father's attitude toward her was so mean-spirited that Yael wondered if he would even take her with him when he left Jerusalem or if he would leave her there to die. It was no wonder that when Ben Simon came to Yael, telling her that she was beautiful and showing her through his deeds that he would protect her that she would feel no need to deny herself to him.

Religion is another major theme in the novel as the war with the Romans was waged because of religious principles. The author notes that not only were the Romans at war with the Jews but the Jews were at war with one another. Some priests were allowing the temple to be defiled by letting the Romans offer sacrifices there. Groups of zealots like Yael's brother and father believed justice needed to be served to these unfaithful priests and took the matter of revenge into their own hands.

Yael's own religious battle is a thread within the topic of religion. In this section she describes her act of breaking one of God's laws. Under these laws, the Jews were forbidden from harming or mutilating themselves. Yael, however, made a cut on her leg each day as a way to tally the number of days she and the others spent in the desert. She indicates that once she broke this first law, the rest of her sins were easy. Notice even though Yael was a Jew, she knew if she went to a priest in the temple for a blessing on her brother, who was a known assassin, her request would be denied. Instead she went to the keshaphim, a group of women who practiced magic in secret. Their magic was outlawed by the church but because the church had turned against some of its own followers, Yael had to go to an unapproved source for protection for her brother.

Discussion Question 1

Why did Yael's father blame his daughter for the death of her mother? Was his accusation fair? How was Yael able to cope with her father's displeasure in her?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Yael's interaction with the keshaphim woman from whom she got Amram's protective charm. Why might the woman have thought Yael needed protection for herself?



Discussion Question 3

Research the Romans' attack on Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. How is the book true to history? How do the stories differ?

Vocabulary

nomads, cunning, legions, defiled, treachery, besieged, deferential, affront, coursing, omen, haphazardly, despise, solace, plaits, cohorts, sinister, condone, renounce, exorcisms, charlatans, amulet, aphrodisiac, antidemonic, prostrate, tutelage, phoenix, disconcertingly, marauding, scrounge, wraith, mayhem, edict, collusion, peril, inure, deferential, sequestered, metes, ibex, garrison, rapt, recourse, mirages



Part 1 (Yael): Pages 42-80

Summary

Ben Simon found a goat in the desert. Though it should have belonged to Sia, it preferred Yael. Yael wondered if Sia knew about her affair with Ben Simon because of the goat's reaction to her. Sia began refusing to walk with Yael and even bathed alone. When the group finally found a place to stay for a while, Yael found a solitary cave in which she could stay during the time of her period. She preferred to be alone. Yael felt guilty because of the way she was sinning. Her father had even less to do with her, praying over the food she gave him as if he were casting out demons from it before he ate it. When Yael mentioned his prayer to him she realized too late it was the prayer of the dead he was saying, a sign he was still mourning the loss of his wife. Even when Yael was having her period, Ben Simon still came to her even though it was a sin. Yael knew that Sia realized where he was going when he disappeared. Yael learned to catch birds and break their necks even though it was sinful.

Yael and her group celebrated the reconsecration of the temple with a single dove Yael trapped in her scarf. They had little with which to celebrate the holiday. Ben Simon continued to visit Yael in her cave. One day Yael's father asked her if she wanted to be a prostitute. Yael replied he had driven her to that life. She compared herself to the leopards that roamed the desert. She spotted a leopard and ran it off by making herself as fierce as she could. Yael was satisfied with her life until Sia's children became sick. When she heard Sia crying that she should be sick and die instead of children, Yael wished the same even though she knew her desire was wrong. Yael's father was terrified he would become ill as well and spent his days chanting to God.

Yael caught food to feed the Ben Simon's family, found twigs for a fire and dug for water. She felt she was healing them for each other as Ben Simon no longer came to her cave at night. Yael committed a blood ritual believed to have the power to bind Ben Simon to her. She thought she was successful because Ben Simon came to her that night. She wondered later if it were not she that had been caught in her own trap.

The boys did not improve and soon Sia was sick as well. She made Yael promise to take care of Ben Simon should she die. When Yael came to the camp and saw Ben Simon crying and holding one of his children, Yael knew the only thing she could do for him that would matter was to find a cure for the children. Ben Simon insisted that Yael's father go with her. When Yael realized they were wandering in the desert and had passed the same cliff three times, she tore the scarf her brother had given her into pieces to serve as a way for them to find their way home. When Yael's father did speak to her it was with anger. Their hope revived when they caught a glance of the Salt Sea. As they walked the path toward the sea Yael and her father discovered an abandoned settlement where a group belonging to the Essene sect had lived. The next day, they found the survivors of the settlement who had moved on to a nearby oasis to wait for the End of Days.



These people were dedicated to kindness and to peace. They vowed to help the sick mother and children Yael and her father had left behind by giving them food and clothes. The old priest, named Abba, gave Yael's father a fever charm, blessed rope and a bulb of garlic to keep away demons. Yael learned from Tamar, one of the women, that the Sicarii, the group of assassins of which Yael's father was a member, were the ones that had attacked their settlement.

Yael and her father followed her trail of blue back to the camp where they'd left Ben Simon and his family. When they arrived, the camp was empty. Yael and her father found the bodies where Ben Simon had arranged them in a cave before he laid down beside them and died. Yael was so grief stricken she refused to bury the bodies as was a woman's job even though her father beat her. Her father was away for seven days to cleanse himself. During this time Yael did not eat or drink. She began marking to days by cutting her leg again this time using the knife Ben Simon had given her. A leopard came to her campsite but didn't even bother her. When her father returned, he convinced her to take a sip of water only because he considered that was what his wife would have wanted him to do. Yael began drinking and eating again not because she no longer mourned, but because she knew she was carrying Ben Simon's baby.

Soon after the death of Ben Simon and his family Yael's father had a dream in which he saw Amram waiting for them in a tower. Meanwhile, Yael was haunted by Sia's ghost, which seemed to laugh at her. The rains came and Yael found a clear pool in which to cleanse herself. She noticed how thick her abdomen was getting even though the rest of her body was thin.

One evening Yael saw two warriors coming across the desert. She told her father who believed it was the men who would lead them to Amram. Even so, they were cautious as the men approached until one of the men said they had been sent by Hol. Yael's father dropped his knife. The men later told Yael they had found them because Amram had found one of the blue squares of silk from her scarf and recognized it.

Analysis

In this section of the novel Ben Simon and Yael continued their affair even though Sia had realized what the two were doing. This knowledge had a profound effect on the relationship between Sia and Yael. Sia began refusing to walk with Yael and would no longer talk to her when the two went about their cooking duties. Notice that Yael didn't seem particularly upset by Sia's decision to stay away from her as Yael preferred to be alone. Yael even went so far as to hope that the woman who had once tried to befriend her would die so Yael could have full rights to Ben Simon. Notice that when Sia was sickened by the same disease that her sons had, she asked Yael to take care of Ben Simon after she was gone. After Sia died, however, Yael felt that Sia's ghost came back to haunt her. She reports being able to feel the woman pinch her to get her attention and laugh Yael's belief that she would have Ben Simon to herself when Sia died. Remember that after her father tormented her for crying telling her that was why her mother had died that Yael had promised herself that she would never cry again. When



Yael cried the night she bathed herself in a pool of water for the first time and noticed her thickening abdomen, Yael blamed her tears on Sia, claiming they were not her own.

Women's duties are an aspect of the topic of women discussed in this section of the novel. Notice that it is indicated that it was the woman's job to bury the dead and carry out the burial rituals. Yael, however, refused to do so, even after her father beat her. Yael's father was unhappy because he had to stoop to a woman's duty because his daughter refused to do as she was supposed to. Notice also in this section that Yael believed she had dishonored her father. The incident, however, showed there was still some tenderness inside him. Yael believed her father was praying over his meals because he thought she had infected them with some sort of demon because she was sinning with Ben Simon. Before she realized he was actually saying the prayer for the dead, out of respect for Yael's mother, she commented to her father. Although Yael did her best to present her father as an inhumane and completely cruel man, he showed his humanity once again when he made Yael drink a sip of water when he came back from his period of purification after burying Ben Simon and his family to find Yael had not drunk or eaten in all that time. He told her later he had done so because he felt that was what her mother would have done.

The tension in the relationship between Yael and her father was also demonstrated when Yael's father told her that she was bad luck and he expected nothing less from anything she came in contact with. This idea adds to the theme in the novel of Omens and Fate. Although Yael had been pleased with her life as it was, she was not surprised when Ben Simon's boys got sick. She indicates there were signs there was bad fortune all around as they drank dirty water and ate food that had not been blessed. Another incident in this section of the novel where Yael mentions the importance of one's fate takes place when she describes the way in which Ben Simon said goodbye to her as she left with her father to look for a cure for the fever. Ben Simon appeared to be saying goodbye to her as if he knew he would not live until her return. Another bad omen was seen by Yael when she was taken to the ritual pool of the Essene people to bathe and the water turned black around her. Dreams can also be included in the theme of the people's belief in omens and fate. In this section Yael's father dreamed of meeting up with Amram in the desert. Ironically, his dream comes true but not that it was a bit of Yael's scarf, the girl who he constantly told was the bearer of bad luck, that led Amram's friends to them.

Notice in this section that even though Yael felt convicted of her sin and knew what she was doing was wrong, she continued her behavior. When the Day of Atonement came Yael felt uncleansed and guilt-ridden as she thought of herself as an adulteress as well as a murderer.

As the Yael and her group spent more and more time in the desert, they began to forsake the feast days and Sabbath celebrations they believed they had been commanded to participate in by God. They had no food or wine to celebrate with so even the occasions that called for feasting and celebration were not festive. They got food anyway they could, even if the manner went against their Biblical laws.



Discussion Question 1

Consider the references to animals in this section of the novel. Why is such emphasis given to the habits of these creatures?

Discussion Question 2

Even though Yael's father believed his daughter was bad luck, it was actually she who helped Amram locate them. How did she do this? Do you think her father would give her any credit for her part in their reunion?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Yael's reaction to Ben Simon's death. What made her decide to break her mourning fast?

Vocabulary

sustenance, relinquish, reproachfully, affront, seclude, banished, lair, entwined, reconsecration, ferment, blanched, renegade, bested, excrement, azure, scriptorium, fetid, berate, famished, ventured, entanglements, affront, defied, resolved, enmeshed, carnage, pious, agape, treachery, lamentations, envision, emanated, skeptical



Part 1 (Yael): Pages 80-123

Summary

Although she wanted to stay in the place where Ben Simon's bones rested, Yael knew it would mean death so she chose to go through the desert with her father and the two soldiers. She knew the journey from the desert would be too hard on the goat so she set it free. When she tried to run it away from her because it wanted to follow, Yael felt as if she were chasing Sia's ghost away instead of the goat.

In the desert they made their meals on birds Yael would catch. The warriors joked with Yael that she was a huntress but her father only glared at her. The two warriors, who were really just boys, told stories of the fortress to which they were headed. Yael thought these stories were absurd as they described the fortification built by King Herod as being impenetrable. Herod had built the fortress because he thought it would allow him to hide out from his fate after he murdered both his wife and son. As they traveled onward, Yael realized that Sia's ghost was still with her. She was filled with remorse. Yael believed Sia's refusal to let go of her was comparable to Yael's refusal to let go of Ben Simon.

One night Yael was awakened by the shouts of the warriors as they were suddenly able to see Masada. As Yael climbed the snake path to the fortress she realized this dangerous path was the snake she'd seen in her dreams. She knew then she was meant to be at Masada. Despite the sins she had committed while in the desert, God had still looked upon her and rescued her. As she walked through the gate of the fortress, however, Yael realized she was still unable to forgive God for the loss of Ben Simon.

After she was cleansed in the mikvah, Yael was allowed to see her brother. She thought for a minute they might be able to return to their days in Jerusalem but when her brother called her Yaya, she knew those days and that girl were gone. He showed her that he still wore the amulet of Solomon around his neck and asked about her scarf. She showed him the square she had left and he surprised her by pulling out a similar square. He said it was how he had known that she and their father were still alive. They walked around the compound and Amram showed her the orchard, fields, and the storerooms that were still full from when Herod lived there. Amram told Yael that a residence had been prepared for Yael and her father. She was to care for him there. Because she'd had so little in the desert, Yael was satisfied with their rooms and the rations they were given.

When she walked through the fortress alone, Yael spotted a bird observatory. She knew magicians had once thrown bird bones in these structures to tell the future, a practice that had been outlawed. She climbed to the top of this tower and looked at the floor to see the bones left behind. As she stood there a dove lit on her hands when she held them out to it.



The next morning, a girl named Nahara brought Yael a pair of sandals and took her to the dovecote where Yael had been assigned to work. She learned the girl's mother, Shirah, had chosen Yael for the dovecotes when she saw her in the tower. The women who worked in the dovecotes cared for the birds, collected their eggs and their excrements. These excrements were used as fertilizer in the fields. The other workers in the dovecote include Revka, an older woman; Aziza, a teenager; and Shirah, Nahara and Aziza's mother. Revka was critical of Yael, believing Yael thought she was too good to work with the doves. Shirah, however, seemed to recognize Yael for who she was. Yael believed Shirah knew that she was pregnant. She noticed there was a sudden silence when Yael told the women she had been brought there by her brother, Amram. She realized Aziza was in love with her brother.

Yael tried to stay away from the other women and avoided forming relationships. She declined when the other women who worked at Masada asked her to go to the baths with them. They made fun of her, saying she preferred pleasing the Witch of Moab, the name they used for Shirah. They told Yael that Shirah had been brought there by Ben Ya'ir, the leader of the group. Even though Yael didn't think that Shirah was a witch, she did have the unusual feeling as if the woman knew everything about her. She even felt as if she wanted to reveal herself and tell Shirah about the things she had done in her past.

One day, a servant came to talk to Shirah. Yael followed the two and eavesdropped on their conversation. She watched Shirah and realized she was conducting a ritual, binding a man to be true to the servant. The next day, Shirah called Yael to go with her on an errand at lunch. She explained what Yael had seen with the servant the previous day. She said the girl had asked for decency, not love. Shirah promised Yael she would help her as well when Yael came to her for help even though Yael had not asked for anything.

Ben Ya'ir returned from a conquest, bringing with him two Roman prisoners. Even though the others moved toward their leader, Yael shrank from him as if she were afraid he could see who she was. Ben Ya'ir spoke to the crowd, singling Amram out for praise. Instead of listening to Ben Ya'ir, however, Yael noticed her brother was looking at Aziza. Yael went to the mikvah that night because her brother had returned. The women there teased her and Yael tried to join in. She listened to them as they talked about Shirah. As bad as their opinion of Shirah was, the women believed Aziza was something other than a woman, maybe half human, half angel. Yael wondered what the women might have said about her had they known her sins. She believed they talked about Aziza in the way they did because they were jealous of her. Yael told the women she must have been mistaken about Aziza when they deemed her the messenger of the Angel of Death but as she walked back to her quarters, Yael saw Aziza slipping across the plaza. She ran into the arms of Amram.

The women who worked in the dovecote were given one of the Roman slaves to help them with some of their hardest work. Even though he pretended not to know their language, Yael got the feeling that he understood what they were saying. Yael saw he was smart as he came up with a new way to collect the doves' waste. Yael asked if he



had enough to eat, and then killed one of the doves by breaking its neck. She gave it to the slave for his dinner that night.

Analysis

Notice that even though this book is set hundreds of years ago, the women even then gossiped just like modern women. The unfortunate subjects of their gossip were Shirah and her daughter Aziza. Even though Yael didn't believe it was possible, the women speculated that Shirah was a witch while they thought Aziza was even worse than a witch. Even though she didn't believe Shirah was a witch, she did get unusual vibes from the woman. Not only did Yael feel Shirah know more about her than what Yael had shared, she also felt like Shirah was a person to whom she'd like to share who she really was.

Notice also in this section Shirah's reference to Yael as a lioness added to the symbolism of the lion. This was an unusual reference, as Shirah supposedly knew nothing about Yael. Remember, however, that as Yael had climbed the snake path to the gate at Masada, she had compared herself to a lioness, but one with no claws or teeth.

Another aspect of interest in this section of the novel is Yael's attempt to get rid of Sia's ghost. Knowing it would be too difficult for the goat to travel with them in the desert, Yael freed the animal, leaving it on a high cliff. Instead of running away quickly as Yael had hoped it would, the animal continued to hang around her until Yael was forced to chase it off. Even though she was chasing off the physical goat, Yael indicated she felt as if she were chasing off Sia's ghost. Although Yael was successful in chasing off the goat, the ghost stayed with her through her journey to Masada.

As Yael traveled with her father and the two warriors to Masada, religious laws continued to be broken. Because there was no way for Yael to go through the ceremonial bathing process required of women, Yael was considered unclean. By eating the food that she had prepared for them, Yael's uncleanliness was passed on to the men. She also indicates that according to Jewish law, the men shouldn't have been sharing a fire with a woman who was not their mother, sister or wife, yet their actions were required of them as they had no choice.

Notice also that as Yael was incorporated back into a group of people, she desired to be left alone. She'd never really had any experience with other people, even in the village in which she lived because she was considered an outcast and the daughter of an assassin. Her only experience with friendship, with Sia, went badly because Yael had an affair with Sia's husband. Just as Yael had used her silence in the desert to help her catch and kill the birds they needed to stay alive, she also used her silence as a way to protect herself. This idea of silence as protection introduces the theme of the importance of Silence.



Up until this point in the novel it seems that by Jewish law, women were considered subservient to men and given less desirable jobs. While working in the dovecote was probably a job that would be considered undesirable, it was also one that was very important to life at Masada. The wastes the doves left were used as fertilizer for the orchards and fields. Notice the differences between the personalities of the women who worked in the dovecotes. Revka, an older lady, believed Yael though too highly of herself for the work they were doing. She interpreted Yael's silence as snobbishness. Shirah and her daughters seemed welcoming despite the unusual silence when Yael mentioned she was related to Amram. It is later revealed in the novel that Shirah's daughter, Aziza, was in love with Amram. Notice also the jealousy that Yael felt when she saw how close Shirah and her daughters were. Seeing them together made her wish she had a mother to whom she had been close.

Discussion Question 1

Throughout the novel Yael points out places where she and her group were traveling in the desert and broke Jewish law with their actions. Do you think God offered special mercy on them for breaking these laws in the interest of staying alive?

Discussion Question 2

Why was it significant that although God had delivered Yael out of the wilderness, she was not able to forgive Him for her loss of Ben Simon?

Discussion Question 3

Do you think that Shirah realized that Yael was pregnant? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

ossuary, traverse, procure, elusive, preposterous, impenetrable, predatory, remorse, careen, plateau, avert, fortification, confidante, decreed, dovecotes, funerary, abominations, serene, languid, incantation, chattel, conscripted, impenetrable, lauded, myriad, inscribed, rancor, defamed, cloistered, dire, avert, lank, demeanor, comrade, abashed



Part 1 (Yael): Pages 123-170

Summary

As more and more people crowded into Masada, the stored supplies became thin and were rationed carefully. Yael noticed one night one of their neighbors stole firewood from them. Even though Yael cooked for him her father had nothing to do with her. He discouraged the men who asked about her. One night Nahara came for Yael saying Shirah needed her help. Nahara told Yael she had to capture a black female dog and get milk from her, something Nahara could not do because she wasn't yet a woman. They took the milk to an abandoned part of the palace, an old storeroom. Yael began to hear cries. When they reached the room, she recognized the young woman who had gone to Shirah for a binding spell earlier. The young woman was struggling but her baby would not come. It was hot in the room and Shirah's tunic had fallen open. Yael noticed the tattoos on Shirah's chest and knew Shirah was a member of the kedeshah, a group of women once considered holy who had since been outlawed by the church. She sent Yael to the dovecote for dove waste that Shirah used to make a fire.

Yael was afraid the woman would wake others with her loud wailing but Shirah told her it was silence they should fear. The baby finally came, a boy. When Yael asked what would happen to the girl and her baby, Nahara told her they would tell the servant's mistress that the servant found the abandoned baby. The servant and her child would be accepted because it would give the man of the house a new son. Yael suddenly realized she had been called to the birthing because Shirah knew she was pregnant.

Meanwhile, Amram was selected to lead a raid. His selection was an honor but Aziza mourned and worried about him, at one point refusing to come to work at all. Nahara confided in Yael that before Amram had left, Aziza had secretly put the powder of a burned snakeskin in his hair, a charm intended to keep him safe. The raid did not go well and instead of returning to Masada, the men went into cliffs across from the fortress to wait out their days of uncleanness. The people waited in dread for the soldiers to come back, so they could know who survived and who didn't. Amram survived but was different when he returned. He'd had to bury his friend, Jonathan. Amram later told Yael that Jonathan had stepped in front of a blow meant for Amram. Yael told her brother it must have been his fate to live, and then put his hand on her belly. When he felt the baby, he was angry with Ben Simon but Yael indicated to him she could not question the Angel of Life any more than he could question the Angel of Death. He understood the baby was a joy to her.

Yael believed the Roman slave, the Man from the North, spent his time listening to them and learning from their chatter. One day after Yael ran off some boys who had been tormenting him, the man spoke to her telling her that her hair was like fire. He told her about the place he was from where it snowed and many women had red hair. He described to Yael the fate that might await the Jews if they were captured by the Romans, just like his people had been captured by the Romans. Even though Revka



discouraged her, Yael continued to listen to the stories the Man from the North told. One day he told Yael that had he not been captured he'd intended to find and marry a woman like Yael. Although Yael told him she didn't know who she was, he argued that he did.

Yael woke up early one morning and discovered she was bleeding even though her pregnancy was only six months along. She went to Shirah's home for a remedy. The woman gave her tea to drink and asked if there was anyone who might want to hurt the baby. Yael acknowledged Sia's ghost and told Shirah she had taken something that didn't belong to her. Shirah warned Yael that unless she felt regret for what she had done, Sia would take her baby. Shirah gave Yael instructions on how to free herself from Sia's ghost but also warned her that she had to feel regret for what she had done.

The next day, Yael set off to do as Shirah had commanded her. As she thought about Ben Simon's knife and the people he had killed, she believed she was one of his victims as he had killed part of her that would never be revived. She followed Shirah's instructions and ate the herbs she'd been given. As she waited for the spell to begin, Yael realized she needed to speak and not hide behind her silence. Sia's ghost came to her. Yael was upset to see what she had done to Sia. She wrapped her arms around Sia, begging for forgiveness. She cried her own tears. In the morning, Yael saw Sia walking with a lion through the desert, a sign she had taken her husband back.

Yael tried to make amends with her father but he only turned away from her. He was miserable in Masada because he was an invisible and unneeded old man. He was assigned with the lowly job of keeping track of the weaponry. He was also resentful of Amram and his success in warfare. He also did not think Aziza was a proper mate for Amram. He had seen Aziza and Amram together and spat on the ground. Aziza was not the woman that he wanted for Amram. He and Amram fought one night until Amram told his father not to speak to him anymore. Yael tried to convince her brother to forgive their father as he was an old man. They promise to stand by one another.

Yael began to dream about her mother. She went to her father and asked him the color of her mother's hair. Yael's father told her he was surprised she hadn't guessed why he was so grieved every time he looked at her. It was at that time that she realized that her mother had the same color hair she did. Meanwhile, the Man from the North confided in Yael that he planned to leave Masada before the Romans came. While they were working, the man began calling Yael by the word for ruby. When he began doing so, the other women realized he spoke their language. Yael got along well with Shirah and her daughters but still had difficulty with Revka. She carried the woman's ration of water and grain home for her hoping to earn Revka's respect. At her home, Yael spoke to the boys. She was not surprised when they didn't speak back because she'd heard they didn't have voices. When Revka challenged Yael to say something about the boys, Yael only responded that there wasn't much to say and they should keep their mouths shut. Revka softened toward Yael and let it slip that she knew Yael was pregnant.



Analysis

Since this novel details the Jews' fight for religious freedom, it makes sense that a major theme in the novel is Religion. The theme of Religion goes beyond just the desire for religious freedom to address the cleansing power of forgiveness. In this particular section of the novel, it was Yael who chose to finally seek forgiveness for sleeping with Sia's husband. She'd felt as if she were haunted by Sia's ghost since the woman's death. When Yael showed signs of going into early labor she went to Shirah. Shirah told Yael that if she didn't seek forgiveness from Sia, she would lose her baby. Yael's quest for forgiveness combines both the lack of compassion given by the religious authority as well as the people's dependence upon omens and fate, and their belief in ghosts. Yael could not have gone to the church leaders for help in saving her baby because she was an unwed mother. Not only would they not have helped her, they probably would have cast her out of Masada if she'd let her condition be known. Shirah, schooled in the ways of the kashaphim, a practice outlawed by the church, was the one who helped Yael understand that she needed to seek forgiveness from Sia.

After Yael made amends with Sia and figuratively gave her back her husband, Yael seemed to have a new outlook on life. She even tried to make amends with her father but did not make any progress. Yael did, however, learn one reason why her father had always been so loathe to look at Yael. Yael had the same color hair as his wife did. For this reason, every time he saw his daughter, he was reminded of his wife.

Also adding to theme of religious compassion is the way that Yael learned that the slave girl who went to Shirah for help delivering her baby would be treated if it were discovered she was an unwed mother. Because the girl's pregnancy had been discovered, she had been kicked out of the house where she'd been working. Yael wondered what would happen to the girl now that the baby was born. Because it was a boy, Shirah said the girl could go to her employer and tell them she found the baby. The servant would probably get her job back and the baby would be taken in by her employer because it would give the man of the house a new son. Shirah confided in Yael that even though this practice was not looked upon kindly by the church, it would be ignored in this case because it was a time of war and because it would give that man another son.

Notice in this section that it was Yael that Shirah requested to help with the slave girl's birth. Of course this could be because Shirah knew that Yael was pregnant and wanted her to understand she could come to her when her time came. Remember from the text that Nahara told Yael that Aziza would not help with births. The reason for her refusal will be explained later in the novel.

Notice also in this section of the novel that Yael found an opportunity to question the Man from the North about the story Ben Simon had told her about the ten men being forced to fight against a lion. The man told her the gladiators feared lions more than any other animal because once a lion attacked, he would fight to the end. This statement made Ben Simon's claim that the lion he had fought had scratched his face and done



nothing more even more unbelievable. When Yael sought forgiveness from Sia, after her night outside Masada, Yael saw Sia with a lion under a willow tree. In this representation, the lion represented Ben Simon. Yael also noticed the tracks of a lion around the area where she had slept. She believed this meant Ben Simon had watched over her during the night before he'd returned to Sia.

In the theme of silence, notice it is indicated in this section of the novel that there are times when silence is not ideal. During the birthing process, for instance, Shirah told those with her that it was silence during a birth they needed to dread, not a woman who made too much noise. Notice also that although Yael had once protected herself with her silence, she realized when she waited for Shirah's ghost to grant her forgiveness that she could not be silent in her request. She called out for Sia to come to her and forgive her. On the flip side of this coin, however, notice that it was in his silence that the Man from the North learned what he needed to learn from Yael and the women as they talked and gossiped while they worked at the dovecote.

Another reference to notice in this section of the novel is the mention that red thread was seen as an item that offered protection. Earlier in the novel, Yael indicated her fate was bound to her feet with red thread. The reference to the red thread makes more sense when one understands the red thread was important because it was said to be noticed by angels and by God.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the differences in Yael before she gave Ben Simon back to Sia and after she received Sia's forgiveness. How did forgiveness change her?

Discussion Question 2

Why was it significant that Yael and her mother shared the same hair color? How does this help to explain why Yael's father had so much difficulty relating to Yael?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Shirah called for Yael to help her with the servant girl's birth? What did Yael learn during this experience?

Vocabulary

teeming, privy, plaintive, controversial, mutilate, concocted, emanated, retching, harbinger, intonations, mayhem, proximity, eluded, bereavement, reviled, pronouncement, torrent, feigning, massacre, recount, demurred, chastised, reproachfully, pliant, stanching, crevice, secluded, denounce, rending, cisterns, intricacy, allotment



Part 2 (Revka): Pages 173-213

Summary

Revka, the Baker's wife, thinks about how she took her good fortune and happiness for granted when she lived with her kind hearted husband and beautiful daughter in the Valley of the Cypresses. Now, she lives at Masada with her two grandchildren. Her daughter and husband are dead. Her son-in-law lost his faith and no longer spoke to them. Her grandsons had lost their voices in desert. She hears the other women call Shirah a witch, but she understands wickedness and evil and knows that Shirah isn't either of these things.

Revka believed she had been cursed when she was assigned to work in the dovecotes because she had to collect the birds' waste. She cried herself to sleep that night. In the morning, her grandson Levi led her to the wall to watch the doves fly. She realized he was trying to tell her it was an honor to work with the doves because they flew so close to God. Revka remembers her son-in-law chose Masada as their place of refuge because it offered the revenge he wanted. She describes how he has changed, refusing to acknowledge even his own sons in his desire for revenge. She wonders at the changes in herself as she thinks that she can cry when she takes the doves' eggs, but feels nothing for the men she killed.

Revka describes how the Roman legionnaires came to their village and killed a white cockerel on the steps of the synagogue. 100 men went to the soldiers asking for an apology. They did not receive that apology. One day Revka's husband went to the temple with a sacrifice of his first loaves of bread. He'd told Revka he would avoid trouble but on that day he was talked into joining a group of men going to the Romans to beg to be allowed to keep their homes. Revka knew something was wrong when she began to smell smoke. When he still hadn't returned home that evening, Revka went out to look for her husband. She was met at the door by Yoav, her son-in-law. He told her that her husband was dead, he saw for himself his body. If Revka went to it, she would be killed as well. Yoav told her she must go and pack so they could leave. Revka chose the things that had belonged to her husband. She felt as if she had an angel guiding her, telling her what to take, especially when it came to the small container of hemlock her husband kept to kill rats.

They fled the city with the rest of their neighbors as the Romans set fires. Revka remembers how they slept outside the first night, uncomfortable and afraid. She dreamed of her husband making bread. In her dream he told her that every loaf of bread would feed a person in the way in which they needed to be fed. As the days passed, the family's supplies of food got low. Yoav hoped to outwait the Romans and then return to their city when the soldiers left. Revka doubted there would be anything to return to. Yoav had no hunting skills, being only a priest. He prayed for guidance. After several days, Revka felt the spirit of her dead husband with whom she'd been talking, leave her.



She wanted to stay in that spot and not go on. The only thing that motivated her was her grandchildren.

They finally located a small oasis where Yoav thought they could wait out the Romans. Revka realizes now it was not a good idea to stay in that one place as others would find it and want it for themselves. They didn't see many people during that time but ones they did see told them about the Zealots who had set up camp in what had been Herod's palace.

Before they realized it was Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, Revka and Zara had been out gathering sticks for firewood. Their boys had been playing with raven feathers that had covered the road. When the women realized their mistake, they knew what they had done called for punishment. Yoav was angry when he saw what the boys had done. He left the camp and went into the desert to pray.

Revka interrupts her own story, telling how the noise in the dovecote helps to cover her mourning. She often noticed Shirah looking at her strangely as she worked. One day, Shirah took Revka's hand and looked at her palm. Revka felt as if Shirah had taken some of her burden with her. Revka remembers also when Yael first came to the dovecotes. She would never have believed the girl would come to live at her house. She'd begun to change her mind about Yael when she saw how the doves came to Yael without the girl even having to call them. Shirah told Revka it was because Yael spoke the birds' language, that of silence. Revka admits she knew that Yael was pregnant even though she told no one. She wonders what will happen to her.

Returning to her story about their escape from the Valley of Cypresses, Revka says the deserters from the Tenth Legion who attacked them had come for their donkeys. They were distracted by Zara's beauty. It was a Sabbath and Yoav had gone into the desert to pray. The wind kept him from hearing what was happening. Revka sent her grandsons into a crevice in the rock behind a waterfall hoping they would be protected.

The four men attacked Zara at the fire. Revka tried to fight them off but two of the men hit her in the head with a rock while the other two pulled off Zara's clothes. She was unconscious while the Romans tortured Zara but her grandsons saw everything that was happening. Revka woke to find her daughter dying. The men had raped her and then burned her with sticks and rocks. They'd put burning rocks inside her. Zara begged her mother to finish her off. Revka did as her daughter wished but put her mouth over Zara's to catch her last breath. Revka asked the soldiers to kill her but they ordered her to cook for them instead. As if guided by an angel, Revka baked perfect loaves of bread. The bread was laced with the hemlock Revka had brought. She served the soldiers the poisoned bread. After eating, they were overcome by an unquenchable thirst. One begged Revka for mercy, but she had none.



Analysis

Unlike Yael, who had an unfortunate life beginning with her birth, Revka's life was happy and full. She had a wonderful husband, nice home and beautiful daughter. These things changed when the Romans attacked her town and killed her husband. In the desert, her daughter was raped, tortured and fatally injured by Roman soldiers. In retaliation, Revka fed the soldiers bread poisoned with hemlock. She arrived at Masada grieving the loss of her daughter and believing herself to be a murderer. Revka fell to the point that she believed it was her fate when she was assigned to work in the dovecotes. She saw the job as a sign that she was a disgrace to God. It was only after one of her grandsons showed her how close those birds flew to God that Revka began to reconsider her opinion of her position.

Omens, premonitions, and signs continue to be important in the novel. The ravens are a major omen in this part of the novel as Revka believed it was they who foretold what was about to happen to her daughter. Black seems to be the color that represents evil so it makes sense that the ravens, which are black, would be thought to convey news of coming bad luck.

A person's inability to outrun her fate is also a theme that is addressed in this section of the novel. Revka wondered if she had foretold her daughter's future when she gave her a name that mean morning. Playing on the pronunciation of the word, morning and mourning sound alike.

Revka's belief that she might have foretold her daughter's future by naming her as she did leads to another aspect in the theme of women. Women were beneath men in the Jewish church. They believed that women were unable to know and understand the ways of God. Revka didn't think this was true as she believed she had seen God's truth.

Because Revka's grandsons became mute when they saw their mother being abused by the Roman soldiers, the theme of Silence is important in this section of the novel. Revka contrasted God's ability to create the world through the spoken word with the silence in which her world came apart. Her grandsons had lost the ability to speak and her son-in-law retreated further and further into himself not wanting to talk or have anything to do with Revka or his children. Because the others at Masada did not know what had happened to cause the boys to lose their voices, there were rumors that the boys were possessed. The fact that their father had nothing to do with them only strengthened the peoples' belief that there was something wrong with the children. Revka had realized from being around her mute grandchildren that it was possible to know a person's thoughts and desires even without being able to communicate verbally. Notice also that Revka believed it was Yael's silence that caused the doves in the dovecote to go to her even though Yael didn't seem to particularly care for them.

Notice in this section that although Yoav was a deeply spiritual man and dedicated scholar, he seemed to turn his back on his faith when his wife was killed. Even though it was against Jewish laws, Yoav injured himself by destroying the father he was to his children. He had set his mind on revenge and could see nothing else. His actions



seemed to indicate that he longed for death as he refused to wear armor when going into battle.

In the theme of Religion, notice that Revka believed it was the actions of she, Zara and the grandchildren on Yom Kippur that caused such bad luck to come to them. She believed God was punishing the family for not keeping the day as He had instructed. Yoav also believed that by going into the desert and praying that he could undo the wrong his family members had done by going about their usual activities on the holy day. This gives the impression that the Jewish people believed God was unforgiving.

Discussion Question 1

Do you think the actions taken by Revka and the others on Yom Kippur had anything to do with Zara's death? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Why did the Jews believe that women could not see or understand the ways of God? Do you think they were justified in their beliefs? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Compare and contrast Revka's story with Yael's. In what ways were the two women different? Were there any ways in which they were similar?

Vocabulary

rendered, mute, intricately, stoked, granary, piety, vista, treacherous, luminous, sorcery, catastrophe, splayed, eschews, goads, negligence, reminiscent, reputable, beleaguered, plagued, peril, teeming, vile, compel, devout, countenance, atone, distraught, tactics, intimidated, decree, roiled, essence, chided, covet, premonition, hermit, foraging, rended, arrogance, loam, pliant, chalice, venture, cohort, swath, insignia, traitors



Part 2 (Revka): Pages 213-254

Summary

Revka slit the throats of the four soldiers to make sure they were dead, then tended to her daughter's body, washing and wrapping it. Yoav cried and cursed when he came back to find what had happened. She was afraid he would run off into the desert, but she needed him to help her get her grandsons to safety. When she went for the boys where they were hidden behind the waterfall, they could not talk. They left the oasis, afraid someone would come looking for the dead soldiers. They wandered in the desert, finding the road to the Salt Sea accidentally. Yoav hardened during the journey. He came upon a settlement of nomads and he traded the silver chalice he'd once used for the wine blessing for an ax. He practiced with it at night. His devotion changed from his scrolls to the object of destruction.

When they reached Masada and began the climb up the snake path, Revka felt as if this was the last time her grandsons would have their father with them. Before they began the climb, Revka told Yoav she had taken Zara's last breath so that she was still with them in that way. She motioned for Yoav to bend down, and blew the breath into his mouth.

Even though the women in the compound wanted to befriend Revka, she could not stand their good humor or their faith when she had none of either. She knows they cannot out run their fate. Roman soldiers have set up scouting camps nearby, ones that their men had to slink away from when they went to check them out because there were so many men there.

One night Revka and her grandsons were surprised to hear a knock at their door. It was Yael, holding a basket containing her belongings. Revka thought about sending her away but when she let her in, she noticed the girl had a bruise on one eye. Yael said only that she and her father had argued. Revka realized she been hateful to Yael because the girl was alive while her daughter was not. The next morning, the two walked to the dovecote together. Revka told the women there that Yael was helping her with her grandsons. Revka noticed the slave seemed angry when he saw Yael had been hurt. She told him to mind his own business as Yael didn't need his problems as well as her own.

Yael had befriended Revka's grandsons by telling them stories about her childhood experiences with scorpions when she found one of those creatures in their house. Revka watched as the boys were fascinated by her tales and followed her as she captured the scorpion and then set it free outside. In exchange for being allowed to stay with Revka and the boys Yael worked hard doing chores and taking the load off Revka. One day while they were working at the looms, Revka asked Yael if she had learned the stories she told the boys from her mother. Yael told her she didn't have a mother.



Revka remembered hearing a conversation between Yael and the Man from the North that she shouldn't have heard. A hawk that had been circling the dovecote ate from Yael's hand when she held grain out to him. The slave noticed this as well. He teased Yael by telling her that she had bewitched him as well. Yael had laughed at him, and he had insisted she was not like anyone he'd met before and kissed her on the wrist. Even though Revka thought it was a bad idea, the Man from the North continued to feed the hawk, making a pet of him.

One day during the month of Av, 14 members of an Essene sect sought refuge in the fortress. There was tension at first as their leader, Abba, declared it was their fate to be there even though the difference between them and the warriors was night and day. The tension seemed to be broken when Yael recognized her friend Tamar and ran to greet her. Three of Tamar's sons and her husband had been killed when their settlement was raided. It was Ben Ya'ir who allowed the group to stay. The people of Masada were to leave the group of Essene alone and allow them to observe their customs freely. Yael and Revka gave the women gifts of olives, cheese and wheat. Nahara brought flasks of oil and water sent by her mother. One of the boys helped her carry the water. She and the young man talked alone while Yael and Revka talked to the women. Revka overheard Tamar ask for Yael to promise she would help her make sure that Yehuda, the one son she had left wasn't taken from her. Tamar mentioned to Yael she knew it was in order to save a man that she'd wanted the fever charm she'd come to them looking for.

Later that same month, Abba sent the young Essene man, Malachi, to work in the dovecote. Nahara befriended him and the two were soon often seen engaged in long conversations. Although Malachi worked hard, Shirah soon became unhappy with his relationship with her daughter and asked him not to return to the dovecotes. Yael happened to overhear the conversation. Shirah told Yael that if Nahara were her daughter she would have done the same. The Essene woman chosen by Malachi would be expected to walk behind him with her head bowed. Nahara believed her mother was not interested in her happiness but Aziza assured Nahara she did not want to be with the Essene people especially considering the way they lived. Nahara disappeared and they wondered if she had already gone to Malachi. Yael tried to assure Shirah that Nahara would come back but Shirah said her daughter was already gone.

As Shirah said those words there was suddenly a cool wind and rain. When Yael licked her lips she realized it wasn't just any rain but salt rain from the Salt Sea. The salt could kill their plants, fields and orchards so no rain would have been better. Inside the dovecote Shirah grabbed a dove and slit its throat intending to recite a spell to come between Malachi and Nahara. Revka watched as the water from the rain cleansed away the blood of the dove. She thought that rain took the power out of the spell. On her way home, Revka saw Nahara walking with Malachi and knew she had become one of the Essene.

Finally in the month of Av, Yael's water broke as she cooked the evening meal for Revka and her family. Revka and Yael made their way to the storeroom where the servant girl had her baby to meet Shirah. Although Yael's father hadn't accepted his daughter's



situation and hadn't been to see her, her brother had. He'd brought a toy, a rattle, for the baby and had told her he was sorry for putting her with Ben Simon. She countered telling him the baby would be a joy to her. Revka reports the birth was easy once it started even though Yael seemed convinced she wouldn't live to see her baby. The baby was born safely and Revka went out for air after he was placed in his mother's arms.

To her surprise, the Man from the North was waiting on the stairs. Revka told him he was a fool but the slave refused to leave until he saw Yael and knew she was all right. He smiled when he saw Yael with her baby, almost as if he were the father, Revka had thought. After the birth, Shirah crouched beside Yael. She gave her one of the gold amulets she wore for protection to Yael, telling her it would keep her safe. Nahara had seen the giving of the amulet. As she passed Revka on her way out she mentioned to the older lady that the gift was one that a mother would give a daughter. She felt her mother was making a point, giving it to Yael, and Revka sensed the hurt and scorn in her voice. Revka asked the girl if she would have taken the gift if it had been offered to her. She then reminded the Essene women are supposed to share everything they had. Nahara told Revka a daughter shouldn't have to share her mother.

At the baby's circumcision eight days later, Amram came to stand with the women. Yael's father, the assassin, has also come. Amram told Yael that their father would complete the ritual. Yael was afraid to let her father have the baby but agreed to do so because her brother told her the baby had brought them together. Yosef bar Elhanan disappeared after blessing the baby. Revka, Shirah and Yael participated one night in a naming ceremony for the baby. Under the night sky, Yael named her baby Arie, the word for lion.

Analysis

Even though Revka had tried to keep to herself at Masada, she agreed to take Yael in when the girl came looking for a place to stay. Revka had not liked Yael when she first met her. It could be because the two were alike. They'd both had bad experiences in the desert, experiences for which they felt they needed forgiveness but didn't want to speak of their crimes, much less ask for forgiveness from them. Revka also admitted to herself that when she looked at Yael, she saw her own daughter. She was angry with Yael for being alive while her own daughter was dead. Notice another similarity between Yael and Revka was the reason that they went on in the desert even though they wanted to stay where their loved one had died and mourn. Both Yael and Revka pushed themselves on because of children. Revka kept going for her grandchildren while Yael kept going for the baby she knew she carried inside of her. These women's desire to keep living for the children in their lives will be important later on in the novel as well.

Adding to the theme of Fate, notice that although the Essene people were very different from the Sicarii, they still believed in the power of one's fate. When Abba spoke to the leaders at Masada he told them it was their fate to take refuge there even though the two groups of people had completely different ideas about the way the laws of God



should be followed. Fate also played a role in Shirah's decision to send Malachi away from the dovecotes. She knew what Nahara's fate would be if Nahara were to marry Malachi. The other women who worked in the dovecote could also see how different Nahara's life would be as she would be forced to be subservient to a man who would always put God first and expect Nahara to walk a step behind him. In relation to omens, the people received what they considered to be a bad omen when Masada received a rainfall full of salt from the Salt Sea. This useless, even destructive, rainfall was a way in which the people believed God was judging them and punishing them for bad behavior.

In the theme of Religion in this section of the novel is the difference between the beliefs of the Sicarii as compared to those of the Essene. It has already been determined that the Sicarii were a bloodthirsty people who were ready to kill those they felt didn't comply with the Jewish religious beliefs. They felt they were carrying out God's justice when they killed priests and leaders who allowed the temple to be defiled and God's laws to be broken. In contrast, the Essene were people of peace. They did not believe there should be any fighting or defense allowed when it came to their religious beliefs. Abba made the point to the people of Masada that even though they were drastically different in their religious beliefs, they were all the children of the Lord.

Silence continues to be an important theme in this part of the novel. It is in this section that the reader learns at exactly what point Revka's grandsons lost their voices. They had not spoken since they'd come out from behind the waterfall where they'd been able to see what the Roman soldiers were doing to their mother. When Yael moved in with Revka and the boys, she taught them about the scorpion. She showed them how the creature used its silence cunningly. Because the scorpion was silent, it could sense things other creatures could not. Yael let the boys know she accepted them even though they couldn't talk by telling them stories of the creature whose silence was a gift to it.

Yael's lion surfaces again in this section of the novel. When she went into labor, Yael believed the pain she felt was her punishment for her affair with Ben Simon. As Revka helped her to the storeroom where Yael would give birth, Revka heard talking to herself about a lion she had lost in the desert. The reader knows this lion is Ben Simon but Revka didn't know if Yael was talking about an actual lion or a man. Notice also that when it comes time for Yael to name her baby, she names him in honor of his father. Although no one would guess the connection, Yael gave her baby the Jewish name for "lion." It was a nod to Ben Simon, the man who had been bitten by a lion and survived it, the man who Yael assumed took the form of a lion in her dreams.

Shirah made an interesting choice in this section of the novel as she gave one of the gold amulets she wore to Yael after Yael gave birth to her baby. The amulet was a symbol of protection and the novel indicates that it was a gift that should have been given to a daughter from her mother. Nahara, who was present at the birth, took very unkindly to her mother giving Yael the amulet, believing that her mother was making a statement about Nahara. More information later on in the novel will explain why Shirah gave the amulet to Yael and why it was not an attempt on her part to shame Nahara. Nahara's reaction was interesting as it was she who had chosen to join the Essene people. Revka tried to make the girl understand that the amulet would not fit with her



new lifestyle but Nahara seemed fixed only on the idea that another woman had taken her place in her mother's life.

Discussion Question 1

What do you think Shirah meant when she told Yael that if Malachi had known who Nahara really was that he wouldn't have wanted her?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Yael went to Revka after her father struck her?

Discussion Question 3

Do you think Revka's murder of the men who killed her daughter was justified? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

mirage, perilous, resolved, intrusion, attuned, inclination, ashen, poultice, tarried, alliance, transpired, solace, hypnotic, tableau, decimated, abhorred, unadorned, parapets, proclamation, abode, fervently, pallid, luminous, fervent, rapt, wafted, eschewed, wrought, deferred, pious, heedless, induce, arid, elude, averted, avail, imminent, swatch, delirium, manacles, entranced, circumcised, blighted, endure



Part 2 (Revka): Pages 254-310

Summary

The warriors had gone out to hunt but had to retreat to the fortress because the Romans came back spy on the people at Masada. Nahara was missed in the dovecote. Her sister would follow Nahara around, trying to talk to her but Nahara always refused. Aziza began making arrowheads in her spare time, a task that Revka saw suited her. The slave gave Aziza tips on making her arrows better. He suggested putting feathers on the shaft to make them fly. Adir was asked to bring a bow from the garrison so Aziza could test her arrows. The boy teased his sister, saying she shouldn't touch it as she might accidentally shoot herself. The Man from the North was first to try the arrows. Each went directly to its mark. He suggested he teach Aziza how to shoot when he saw how intently she was looking at the bow and arrows. Aziza smiled when she held the bow. Her first arrow hit the mark. Revka notice that Shirah came out to watch Aziza like one might watch a swarm of bees set loose.

Meanwhile, a year had passed since Revka's daughter had been killed. She was filled with depression so deep that others avoided her. She went to the warrior's barracks to talk to Yoav, believing he was hurting just as she was. When he finally came, Revka reminded him it was the day of sorrow. He responded by telling her that every day was a day of sorrow. Revka reminded him that she'd given him the last breath of Zara and that he held her within him still. She asked what he wanted. He responded he wanted to hear the voices of his sons. He asked if her God could do that. Revka realized how similar they were. He told her to come back when the two could speak, a sign that the innocent were no longer bordered by a curse. Revka made a vow to get the boys' voices for their father.

She went to the synagogue for an amulet that would cure her grandsons but the priest turned her away as if her problem was not important. Revka went in search of Shirah. She was not at her house so Revka followed the scent of her perfume through a doorway that led to steps downward into the earth. Revka smelled water and realized she had gone down to the largest of the compound's cisterns. She saw Shirah and a man making love in the water that was left in the cistern. She doesn't see the man's face, but recognized him as Ben Ya'ir. She also saw the henna tattoos on Shirah's neck and chest. Revka ran away from what she had seen, but waited at Shirah's door because she knew Shirah had seen and recognized her. When Shirah returned home Revka told her she wouldn't share the secrets she'd learned, but wanted a favor. She told Shirah what happened the night her daughter was killed. Shirah comforted Revka, telling her that it was not a sin to defend her daughter. She told Revka what she wanted was not impossible but that she would have to have patience. Shirah also convinced Revka that she wanted to be forgiven for what she had done. She believed it would only be when she heard her grandsons' voices that she would be able to forgive herself.



Revka began to study patience, a virtue she'd never had. Her husband had been patient, she remembers. She also studied the Man from the North, who was patient as he waited for Yael. She wondered about his patience, however, when she spotted a shadow she recognized as the slave outside their home. The next morning, Revka realized Yael had left the slave's chains unlocked and was treating him like a man. Revka warned Yael that the slave could not become one of them. Yael told Revka that the man was planning an escape. Revka assumed he was trying to convince Yael to go with him. Yael told her that she would not go back into the desert. However, Revka continued to be suspicious of Yael's acts of kindness toward the slave. Later, Revka realized she saw Yael as her daughter and worried about her just as she would a daughter.

Even though Revka had thought he would be jealous of the boy, the slave doted on ArieH. She and the other women were surprised when they overheard him telling the boy that his name was Wynn. Revka knew the slave would leave soon because he wouldn't have told the baby his name unless he considered himself a free man. One day when the council announced no more clean water would be given to slaves, Yael was verbal with her anger. Revka asked if it would have been better if they had killed him. They agreed the men who made the rules were becoming like beasts.

The guards caught the slave one night near the house where Yael lived with Revka. They learned where he was being kept only because they saw the hawk flying over a tower. Revka was surprised how much she missed the slave. The guards questioned the women later that day. Shirah had twisted a small piece of metal into the shape of a key telling them that was what they thought the slave had used to pick the lock of his chains. Shirah asked if one of them could talk to the slave as he had fashioned a rake that had helped in their work. They wanted to learn how to make this tool from him. Ben Ya'ir had gone into the desert and was unable to grant the visit so the women had to make their request to Channa, his wife. Revka was chosen to visit the woman. She took ArieH with her believing the baby would help their cause. Channa spoke to Revka only because ArieH was there. She told Revka she had no favors to give. When Revka heard the woman's struggle to breathe and realized she had a disease, Revka suggested she might be able to help Channa.

Even though Shirah claimed Channa was a demon, she agreed to help. At first, Revka believed she might intend to kill the wife of her lover, but Shirah told Revka that if that was what she wanted, she could have done that long ago. Before she gave the cure to Revka, she asked her to take ArieH back to Yael. When Revka admitted she had promised she would bring the baby with her when she returned, Shirah warned her not to let Channa hold the baby. Revka returned to Channa and gave instructions on how to use the cure. After she was finished, Channa's complexion already looked better changing from sallow to rosy. She promised to take to the guards about a visit with the slave. She also asked Revka to tell the witch she was grateful.

Yael was angry when she returned from her visit with the Man from the North. She asked Revka to see if she could get Channa to agree to another visit so that she could at least get him food and water. Yael didn't want to allow ArieH to go with Revka but



agreed when Revka said there was nothing to fear from Channa. Despite Shirah's warning, however, Revka allowed Channa to hold ArieH during the visit. As long as Revka took the baby to visit Channa, Channa continued to allow Yael to visit the slave. During each visit to Channa, Revka was careful not to let ArieH out of her sight. She also reminded the woman that ArieH had a family of his own.

Those who had taken refuge at Masada continued to be punished by a lack of rain. Even though they should have been planting fields for spring, they knew there was no need if they didn't have any rain. The people were called to fast, believing that would bring on the rain but that fast was called off after three days because people were so weakened already they couldn't go on with no food.

Ben Ya'ir and his warriors had returned from their search for food. One day Revka watched as Ben Ya'ir met Shirah near her house. Channa had been watching as well. Revka noticed the bitterness in Channa's eyes when she looked back at her husband and Shirah together. She realized Channa was the type of woman who would do anything to keep her husband. The next time she visited the woman, Revka did not bring ArieH along. In the meantime, Shirah had finished her charm to help Revka's grandsons. It was an incantation bowl, one that Shirah said needed another ingredient to make it work. Shirah said the ingredient would come on the day she was in chains.

One day, the men who practiced magic came to the plaza. They and the crowd were looking for someone to blame for the lack of rain. Shirah had not gone to the dovecote that day, feeling she needed to prepare herself for what was to come. The magicians were led to her doorstep where she was waiting for them. Revka, Yael and Aziza ran to the plaza when they learned Shirah had been captured. Of all the people Shirah had helped, not one stood up for her. Ben Ya'ir saw what was happening, however, and demanded she be set free, scolding the crowd for taking out its frustration on one of its own. Revka worried the people would disobey Ben Ya'ir and create their own downfall. The people, however, obeyed his commands and set Shirah free. When Revka saw Channa watching the crowd, she knew it was she who had told the magicians to go to Shirah's house. After she was set free, Shirah drew a circle in the dust then scattered ashes over herself as she chanted. The rain began before the people understood what was happening. The people who had wanted to kill her now though Shirah was their salvation. Revka ran home and held the bowl over her head filling it with water. As she did so, her grandsons got their voices back.

Analysis

In this section of the novel, Revka's grandchildren get their voices back. The miracle was one that was helped along by Shirah's power as a keshaphim. The path Revka had to take to get a charm that would help the boys get their voices back adds to the theme of religion. It particularly speaks to the idea that the religious leaders of the time were not particularly compassionate. Revka had gone through the correct channels at the church by approaching the priest for help for her grandchildren. Instead of helping her, the priest told her that her problem was too insignificant for him to worry about. Because



she got no help or sympathy from the church Revka went to Shirah for help. Even though Revka caught Shirah in a compromising situation in the cistern, Revka waited for her to come back to her house to ask her favor. Just as she had done with Yael, Shirah was able to convince Revka to tell her what was bothering her. Revka confessed to killing the Roman soldiers who had injured her daughter so badly she had to be killed. Shirah opened her tunic showing Revka the tattoos on her body that marked her as a keshaphim. Even though these women who had been trained to assist the priests were once held in high honor, they had since been outlawed by the church. Shirah told Revka she had no right to judge what Revka had done any more than she had the right to judge Shirah for being what God has meant her to be.

There is much tied up in Revka's desire to get her grandchildren's voices back. She referred to the black thread that held the depression and grief to her from the loss of her daughter. Just a red thread seems to represent the promise of protection for the Jewish people, this black thread seems to represent evil, the same way the black birds were considered to be a bad omen. She tried to talk to her son-in-law but saw he was suffering just as badly as she. He had lost faith in God and would only reconsider his faith if his children were to regain their voices. He believed this would be a sign that the children were not being punished for the sins of others. Revka believed it was the least that she could do for Yoav to let him hear the voices of his children again.

As the people at Masada struggle with dwindling supplies of food, they were also facing a shortage of water. They needed rain to make their orchards and fields produce more food to keep them going. When there was no rain, the people considered this an omen that they had fallen out of favor with God. Another bad omen noticed in this section of the novel comes when the doves began laying eggs with dark spots specking their shells. There is one good omen that is pointed out in this section of the novel. When Revka took Arieh with her to visit Channa for the first time she noticed the door to the woman's house was made of cypress wood. Revka took this as a good omen that she would be able to get Channa to allow Yael to visit the slave.

In the theme of Silence, Revka realized that when she went to Shirah for a cure for her grandsons, she would have to break her silence about what had happened to her and her family in the desert. Just as this breaking of the silence was therapeutic for Yael, it was also that way for Revka as she was able to get Shirah's understanding of what she had done. The ending of Revka's story also remarks on the power of silence. She believed she had learned that silence was closer to the divine spirit of God than any number of words. Revka believed that by learning to listen, her faith had been restored.

Adding to the theme of Women in this section of the novel is the strength that the women show. Even though they aren't warriors fighting physical battles, these women fight their own battles. Shirah, for instance, carried on with her way of life despite what the church and many people thought about her. Even though many whispered that she was a witch, she had more compassion and seemed to have a better grasp on the forgiving nature of God than many of the church leaders. When Revka waited for Shirah after she'd seen her with her lover in the cistern, Revka noticed that Shirah was still strong and even argumentative Revka when she asked Shirah for something to help her



grandsons. Although she doesn't think herself so, Revka was another example for a strong female character. Even though she wanted to die, she forced herself to live so she could take care of her grandchildren. While Yoav, who had been such a strong follower of God, discarded his faith and wanted signs to show that God did not punish the innocent, Revka kept her faith. Yoav punished himself and his children in his desire for revenge. Revka, on the other hand, looked for ways to help bring her son-in-law back to the faith.

Yael is also a strong female character. Although Revka encouraged her to ignore the slave, Yael insisted he was a person and should be treated as one. Yael's compassion may come from the years that her father treated her as a mere possession instead of a person. She realized how it felt to be treated in that way and didn't want it for another person. In the previous section of text, Yael showed her strength by forgiving her father for the wrongs he had done her and allowing him to circumcise Ariele even though she was afraid that he might harm the baby.

There are also a few other things of which the reader should take note in this section of the novel. Notice Aziza's interest in and ease with the bow and arrow. Her abilities will be significant later in the novel. Notice also the foreshadowing in this section of the novel that Channa will do something to Yael's baby. Shirah referred to Channa as a demon and warned Revka not to take Ariele with her the next time she visited. Although Revka insisted on taking Ariele along, Shirah told her that she was not to let Channa hold the baby.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think that Shirah was afraid that Channa would do something to hurt Yael's baby?

Discussion Question 2

Why was it unlawful for a woman to touch a weapon? At one point it is indicated a woman might be a better warrior than a man, do you think this is true? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the strengths shown by the women portrayed in this novel. How were their struggles just as important as those faced by the men as they look for food and water for the people?

Vocabulary

foray, virility, frugally, catered, listless, catapult, vied, excruciating, gorged, defiant, torrent, raucous, prevail, denial, ramparts, scrim, opalescent, defilement, swooned,



careened, liling, aqueducts, confiscated, mute, renounce, virtue, renegades, lanky, stalked, indiscretion, impassioned, hewn, veering, edict, violated, resolve, inevitable, strove, dispensation, premonition, piqued, aloof, ailment, plight, abomination, taint, sallow, crude, incarceration, winnow, cloistered, pilfered, sustenance, distraught, render, talisman, fray, chaos, impassive, incandescent



Part 3 (Aziza): Pages 313-357

Summary

Aziza describes the birth of her sister. Even though she was too young to help, none of the other women, who came to Shirah when they needed something, would help in the birth because they were afraid they would be helping to bring another witch into the world. Aziza unwrapped the cord from her sister's throat, and then breathed into her mother and sucked out the liquid from the baby's lungs. Aziza believes this act has bound her sister to her even though Nahara often turned away from her when she saw Aziza.

Aziza remembers that Nahara's father was a wealthy man. He had seen Shirah and Aziza being driven into the wilderness to die and had paid a few coins for them. He earned his wealth not only by selling asphalt but also by robbing from the people who traveled through his land. Shirah had been born in Alexandria where she trained to be a kedeshah, like her mother. It was her mother who gave Shirah the two gold amulets she always wore. Because kedeshah had been outlawed Shirah was sent to kin in Jerusalem. In Jerusalem, Shirah was accused of seducing a married man even though she passed the sotah ceremony, Aziza was proof of an adulterous union.

Although he had other wives, the man who became Nahara's father loved Shirah best. One night bandits came into Shirah's tent and had their way with her. They tried to molest Aziza as well. Nahara's father returned home and killed the thieves. Shirah had cursed being a woman after that night because her gender had prohibited her from doing so much. Shirah had wished she had been the one to kill those who threatened her and her child. On that night, Shirah took Aziza and had a second naming ceremony for her, changing who the girl was and, Aziza believed, changing her fate. Before that time, she had been Rebekah. Now she became Aziza, and a boy.

It was Nahara's father who taught Aziza how to ride horses, shoot and hunt. She believes her element was iron from the start. Aziza never learned how to be a woman, only the ways of men. When she began to develop into a woman, Shirah bound Aziza's breasts. Aziza was distraught when a girl tried to kiss her but she felt attracted to a male friend of hers instead. Shirah told Aziza that she had seen the girl's fate and that love would be her undoing. Aziza was to think of other boys only as brothers. As Aziza grew in skill, Nahara's father had praised her hunting. She was proud when he let her ride beside him. When Adir was born, however, all of that changed.

While Nahara's father was out of town, Shirah would pay special attention to the two doves she had brought along with her to Iron Mountain. Aziza would watch her as she would send one of the doves off with a message. Aziza came to realize that her mother was sending messages to the man who was her father. One day Aziza happened to find one of the messages he'd written to Shirah on a tiny piece of parchment. The message read "my true wife." Aziza understood that her mother was being disloyal to the man



who had taken care of them since they'd been cast out of Jerusalem. Aziza threw the paper into the fire that night but it flew back and burned her face beneath her eye, leaving the scar.

When Aziza was 14, Nahara's father planned to move the family to Petra. Shirah begged to be allowed to stay on Iron Mountain. One day while they were packing, Aziza saw a dove arrive. Her mother went to a place where she could be alone to read the message. The next morning, she woke her children as soon as Nahara's father set off with the other men to ensure the path was safe for women. They mounted two fast horses and set out for the Salt Sea taking very little with them. At the shore of the sea, they met a man with a boat who ferried them across. They camped that night on the shore of the Salt Sea. Aziza's mother told her to undress and burned her boy clothes in the fire. Shirah had brought women's clothes for Aziza to put on and Aziza became a woman again.

Aziza admits she was not good at women's work and often found herself drawn to the places where the warriors stayed. She's never told her secret to anyone, not even to Amram to whom she has pledged herself even though her mother was not yet aware. Amram has been the only man to whom Aziza has been attracted. Even though her mother warned her of her prophecy, Aziza felt it was her fate to disobey her mother. Amram had seen Aziza as well when he first came to Masada and the two were drawn to one another.

Even though the women gossiped, Aziza continued to meet Amram. Nahara covered for her sister. As Aziza became more and more uncontrollable, she questioned her mother about her father but her mother would tell her nothing. The secrets between the mother and daughter forced them apart. Because she was of so little use to her mother since she didn't have the skills of a woman, Aziza believed it was no wonder that Yael had taken her place. Although Yael had been kind to Aziza and not told Shirah when she saw the two of them together, Aziza considered Yael a rival. She remembers the night her mother was arrested, that it was Yael who went to Shirah and not she. Aziza wondered what was so wrong with her that her mother would allow a total stranger to take her place.

Aziza had been convinced that Nahara would return to them when she got tired of the Essene ways. One evening Yael brought Tamar to Shirah's home. Tamar told Shirah that Nahara and Malachi had gone to Abba for his blessing and had been married. Believing she could set things right, Shirah went to her cabinets for spell. Although Yael was the one who comforted Shirah and started to go after her to Nahara, Aziza grabbed her arm and told her what they were about to do didn't concern her. As they hurried, Shirah told Aziza she believed this was how Nahara's father was getting his revenge on her. Shirah performed her spell and told Abba she wanted her daughter. Abba indicated Nahara belonged to Malachi now. When they confronted Nahara inside the house, she said it was too late as she already belonged to Malachi. Nahara told her mother that if she wanted to save anyone, it should be Aziza. Nahara shared with her mother how Aziza had been with Amram multiple times without her mother even knowing. Shirah



slapped Nahara. Aziza realized it really was too late when the wind blew the door to the house open.

Analysis

In this section of the novel, the reader learns why Aziza did not like to participate in births. She had never wanted to have anything to do with the birthing process after watching her sister being born and almost dying. Even though she was young and didn't know what to do, Aziza had saved her sister. For this reason she felt there was an inseparable bond between the two of them.

Notice also the attitude of the other women toward Shirah. Even as a young girl, Aziza noticed that the women of the town would come to Shirah when they needed her help, but refused to come to Shirah when she needed help. This example illustrates another example where Shirah's strength was obvious. Even though she often went out of her way to help others, when Shirah needed help, she was left to her own devices.

The theme of Omens and the importance of one's Fate continues in this section of the novel. Significant in this section is Shirah's attempt to help her daughter avoid her fate by changing her name. After Shirah and her young daughter were attacked, Shirah attempted to protect her daughter by changing her name to a boy's name and making her dress like a boy. Aziza basically grew up as one of the boys, learning how to ride horses and use weapons instead of how to sew and cook. It was believed that when a person changed their name, they would also change their fate. Just as if was believed a baby who died without a name could not be called to God, it was believed that if a person changed his name, he had the opportunity to change who he was to become because he would disappear as the old person and appear to be a new person. Shirah's act of turning Aziza, who was originally named Rebekah, into a boy explains the interest Aziza showed in weapons as well as her ease in handling the bow and arrow. Shirah told Aziza she had to pretend to be a boy because Aziza's fate showed that love would destroy her. Shirah believed if she was able to alter Aziza's gender, she could change her fate.

Later in Aziza's story, as she saw how close Shirah and Yael had become, Aziza wondered if there an omen her mother had seen warning her that Aziza was no good. She believed it was because of the fate her mother imagined was waiting for Aziza that her mother preferred the company of Yael to that of Aziza. Also considered a bad omen was when Tamar came to tell Shirah about Nahara's marriage to Malachi. The Essene woman refused to cross the doorway into Shirah's house. It was a bad omen for the two women to talk to each other across the threshold.

Information in this section of the novel also helps the reader to understand Shirah's earlier statement that if Malachi had known Nahara's true lineage, he would not want her. It turns out that Nahara was the daughter of a fierce warrior who had killed and attacked many men. It can be assumed that the Essene had some sort of prejudice



against people who were related by blood to tribes who were known to be fierce and bloodthirsty.

Notice the ironic differences between what Nahara became and what Shirah had wanted for her daughters. She had gone so far in instilling strength in her first daughter that she changed the child's name and had her pretend to be a boy. Even though Nahara was born of a tribe of warriors, she decided to make herself subservient to man. In the Essene sect, the women followed behind the men, did the heavy lifting and cared for the animals. On page 323 of the novel Aziza indicated that she believed Nahara's father would have been ashamed of her if he saw what she had allowed herself to become.

When Shirah and her children moved to Masada, Shirah had Aziza make the change back into a girl. It is not indicated in the novel why Shirah decided to make this change at this point. Notice Aziza's reaction the first time a man gawked at her because he thought she was beautiful. Notice also how uncomfortable Aziza was with her attraction to Amram. Even though she looked like a girl, she had come into Masada still thinking like a boy.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Shirah and Aziza were so distraught when Nahara decided to join the Essene and marry Malachi? What difference will this make in her life?

Discussion Question 2

How did Aziza's time as a boy affect her even after her mother began having her dress as a girl again? Why did Shirah begin having Aziza dress as a boy to begin with?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the importance of names so far in the novel.

Vocabulary

conceive, aversion, paupers, intertwined, perished, amassed, forge, vistas, repudiated, keening, vile, attribute, inured, crooning, aversion, legacy, solitary, fathom, missive, betrayal, reputed, terraced, plummet, serene, inedible, entrance, palatable, accomplice, toil, seduced, armory, trivial, ardor, incubus, divulge, emboldened, ventured, nimble, plight, divined, haggard, indignant, firmament, indignant, turmoil, bequeathed, beseeched, sect, whore



Part 3 (Aziza): Pages 357-408

Summary

After they returned from the Essene, Aziza and her mother rarely spoke. Adir moved to the warriors' barracks to avoid the silence at home. Aziza realized that because she had never told Amram her given name and he didn't know her secret, he didn't really know her. She began to avoid him because she realized he would not accept her for who she was. She would often put on a man's tunic and braid her hair so she could walk nameless around the compound. That was the only time she felt comfortable. The Man from the North was the only one who had seen her real self when she had shot with the bow and arrow. He'd asked her how many men she had slain she pretended not to know what he was talking about. He taught her his people's technique with the bow and arrow anyway, giving her tips that gave her arrows extra power and flight. When her fingers bled because of her practice with the bow and arrow, she lied and told Amram she'd injured them on the loom. He believed her lie unlike the Man from the North who'd seen the truth.

The stores of food had gotten so low in the fortress that Aziza wondered how long they would survive if they were to be attacked by the Romans. There had been talk that the Romans had captured Machaerus, another Zealot fortress. Every man and woman at that settlement had been killed.

Meanwhile, Arieah had been used as a key to allow Yael to take food to the Man from the North but Channa had begun refusing to let Revka have the baby back when they came for visits. She threatened to have the slave killed if Arieah were not allowed to stay with her. One day Yael told Channa that day's visit would be the last she would allow. When she returned for her baby, Channa had locked the door and stationed a guard outside who would not let Yael in. Aziza began to help Yael and the others keep an eye on Channa as she walked through the marketplace with the baby, showing him off as if he were her own. Revka's grandchildren have told them they have heard Channa telling the baby that Yael was not his mother and that he must be careful of her.

Aziza, Revka, and Yael decided they needed to go to Ben Ya'ir to plead for Arieah. Aziza offered to be the one to go to Ben Ya'ir. Aziza had not expected Ben Ya'ir to answer the door when she knocked. When Aziza told him she was there for Arieah, Ben Ya'ir seemed surprised. Aziza realized Channa had told him Arieah did not have a mother. While waiting outside as she had been directed, Aziza found a cage containing a pair of doves in the courtyard. When Ben Ya'ir gave Arieah to Aziza, he touched her on the forehead, the way a father would greet a daughter.

Because she had a desire to talk to her father, Aziza went to an archery contest dressed like a boy. She had brought her arrows along and realized as she watched the other archers that she had not made them in honor of Amram, but instead because the red reminded her of the lilies of Moab and the person she had been there. She found



herself in the line to compete. After she was finished, there was silence because she'd performed so well. Aziza was happy when she saw Ben Ya'ir stand up to applaud her. However, the crowd thought she was Adir. Aziza ran away as she realized her accomplishment was considered to be the work of Adir.

Aziza described how the Roman soldiers continued to come and survey the fortification at Masada. She knew her people could easily be overtaken by the Romans. When the warriors went out for another exploratory mission, Adir went with them. Shirah was beside herself with worry wondering why the men would have chosen to take him because he was so young. Aziza realized it was her fault that Adir had been sent into battle.

Channa chose a day for the slave to die. It was the same day that several doves fell dead with no apparent cause. Yael gave ArieH to Channa in exchange for the slave's life. Yael began going outside Masada's gates each evening to gather firewood. She began asking for Aziza's help. One day Yael brought along her father's assassins cloak which Aziza wore. One day, Aziza went to the slave's cell where the guard was sleeping after his lunch and picked the lock. She traded places with the slave. The guards at the gate didn't notice when what they believed was two women went through the gate to gather firewood. They didn't notice when only one woman came back. After she was sure the slave had time to get away, Aziza left the cell, dressed in the clothes she wore as a boy.

Because there was so little food, Aziza took to killing pheasants with her bow and arrow. She took some to the Essene and had an opportunity to talk to Nahara as they plucked the birds together. Nahara criticized Aziza for hunting and told her the Essenes offered her peace. After they are finished talking, Aziza told her sister she would be happy for her. In the back of her mind, she thought that her sister still belonged to her even though Nahara claimed she belonged to Malachi.

Aziza noticed the Essene people burying scrolls and asked her mother what their behavior meant. Shirah told her the people were preparing to leave. When Shirah told Aziza it was Nahara's fate to be undone by love, Aziza wondered why her mother had told her that was her fate. Aziza grabbed her arm in anger because of the changes she'd made to try to avoid the fate her mother had said was hers. Shirah admitted that it was her fate that anything she loved was doomed. Aziza was angry believing her mother had interfered with the person she was meant to be by interfering with her destiny.

Aziza went to the place where the Essene had stayed. The only thing they had left behind was Tamar's son, Yehuda. Abba had decided the people could no longer stay there because it seemed the warriors were intent on attacking the Romans. Aziza took Yehuda to Revka to care for him while she went to the gates to watch the Essene people pick their way along the cliffs to a cave near Masada.

In the month of Av, Yael went to Shirah hoping for her help in getting ArieH back. Shirah promised to help her if Yael would do what she asked when the time came. Shirah



prepared to face Channa. When Yael offered to go as well, Shirah told Aziza she was the one who needed to go. Even though she thought her mother had deceived her, Aziza was honored to be the one chosen to help. Aziza realized that her mother was going to perform an exorcism on Channa. They knocked, but no one came to the door. Aziza had brought the key made from wire with her. It opened the lock. They find Channa by following the sound of her raspy breathing. As Shirah conducted the exorcism, Channa looked in Aziza's eyes, recognizing how much they were like her husband's. Although Channa hurt her by calling her a sin, Aziza followed her mother's orders and stayed in the circle of ash her mother had made. Channa held a knife to Arie's throat, saying she would kill him before she'd give him back to Yael. Shirah opened her tunic, showing Channa that she was pregnant. Channa was so surprised that Aziza was able to snatch Arie from him. As they left, Channa warned Shirah that she couldn't take her husband but Shirah spoke back, telling Channa she'd had him all along.

Analysis

In this section of the novel, Aziza began to dress as a boy again because that was how she felt most comfortable. Nahara's marriage to Malachi and Nahara's announcement to her mother that Aziza was sleeping around with Amram seemed to kickstart Aziza's desire to move back into the identity in which she was comfortable. While Aziza's relationship with her mother had been strained before Shirah learned her daughter was sleeping with Amram, the two stopped communicating completely after Nahara's announcement. It was only after Shirah included Aziza in her plan to exorcise Channa that the gulf between Aziza and her mother seemed to be healing. Aziza desperately wanted to know her mother accepted her for who she was. She had watched while Yael seemed to take her place in her mother's heart and didn't understand why her mother preferred the stranger to her. It will become more clear later in the novel why Shirah accepted Yael so easily.

One's fate continues to be an important theme in this section of the novel as Aziza wanted to kidnap Nahara and keep her from leaving Masada when she learned the Essene were planning on leaving the compound. Shirah told her daughter there was nothing they could do as it was Nahara's fate to be destroyed by love, just as it was Aziza's fate. It is at this point that Aziza, and the reader, learned one of the reasons why Shirah tried to keep her distance from Aziza. Shirah's fate had indicated that everything she loved would be destroyed. In order to keep her fate from destroying her children, Shirah told Aziza she'd tried her best not to love them. Despite her best attempts, however, Shirah was not able to protect them from what their fates held in store for them.

Notice that in this section as Aziza begins to move back into her old habits as a boy, she began to doubt in Amram's love for her. When Yael told Aziza that she saw her beauty, just like her brother did, Yael intended the comment as a compliment but Aziza wondered if a pretty girl was all he saw when he looked at her. He did not recognize the qualities of a fierce warrior that lay beneath her attractive features. Even though Amram



once asked her how she injured her hands, injuries caused by her practice with the bow, Aziza told him she'd hurt herself on the loom. She seemed reluctant to tell him the full story of who she was as if he would find her past unattractive. This fear may be tied up in Aziza's belief that her mother could not love her because there was something unspoken that was wrong with her. Aziza may fear Amram might find out about what her mother knew and decide she was, indeed, unlovable.

Again, notice the strength the women show in their determination to get the Man from the North out of Masada. Yael used her attractiveness, and the men's abilities to get easily distracted by pretty women, to her advantage when she developed a routine of making a daily trip out of the compound to search for firewood. Aziza took to wearing the invisibility cloak and going with Yael. For this reason, no one noticed when Yael left with the slave wearing the cloak. They also didn't comment when Yael returned alone. No mention was ever made of slave again so it is uncertain if there was ever a search for him or if the leaders at Masada just decided they were better off without him.

Notice in this section that when Shirah and Aziza went to Channa's house to get Arieah back, Channa's name and the word raven were used interchangeably to refer to her. Remember that in the past the raven, a black bird, was known to mean coming trouble. Even though Shirah was afraid that if Channa knew she was pregnant, she would cause trouble for her, Shirah remained brave and determined to help Yael get her baby back. It was when Shirah exposed her pregnant belly and Channa realized Shirah was again pregnant by Ben Ya'ir that she was so surprised that Aziza was able to get Arieah away from her.

Discussion Question 1

Before Nahara was married to Malachi Shirah was willing to fight to get her daughter back. Once they were married and Shirah saw the marriage had been consummated, she took the attitude that her daughter was dead. Why do you think Nahara's marriage was the point at which Shirah realized she'd lost her daughter?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think that Amram was blind to Aziza's real self? Do you think he would accept her if he knew her background or was he interested only in having a pretty woman?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the role of the thin twist of steel that Shirah first fashioned to make the soldiers believe that the Man from the North had picked the lock on his shackles and set himself free. How does the author use these recurring images to strengthen the continuity of the novel?



Vocabulary

amends, felled, honed, jest, meager, dissipated, pilgrimage, siege, meted, oracle, zealousness, rue, encircled, pyres, auspicious, liberties, toiled, attribute, slanderous, elated, vanquished, thrall, finials, reconnaissance, denounced, woefully, sentries, rife, ethereal, pestilence, buckler, enthralled, adder, emanated



Part 3 (Aziza): Pages 408-450

Summary

A tradesman who came to Masada to sell his wares brought with him a huge black Mastiff. The dog sat at Adir's empty barracks and howled until Aziza took him home with her. When the dog's owner came for him, the dog would not go with him. Aziza bought the dog from him, suggesting his owner had mistreated him. Aziza didn't want a dog, but he was well behaved and she thought perhaps his fate and her brother's were bound together. She named the dog Eran. One night Eran started barking and wouldn't stop. The women gathered at the gate as several of them had experiences they believed meant they were to gather there. When the men arrived, Aziza noticed Amram was carrying Adir over his shoulder. He had been hit by a spear and was suffering a fever. Aziza helped her mother care for him but instead of burning Adir's clothes as she had been ordered, Aziza washed them and hung them up to dry. Even after Adir recovered from his fever, he could still not walk well. Eran was the only creature who brought him any comfort. Aziza was giving the dog a bath, as her mother had asked, when Amram came up to her asking if the dog had taken his place. To her surprised, Eran barked and growled at Amram. Aziza asked Amram not to send Adir out with the warriors next time they left. Because Amram would not promise, Aziza knew she would have to go in Adir's place.

Aziza asked Yael to take her to see Yael's father, Yosef bar Elhanan. When they were alone, Aziza told the former assassin she wanted to learn to be invisible. She told him of her desire to take her brother's place as a warrior. Aziza surprised the man by nimbly pulling out her knife and putting it to Bar Elhanan's throat. By the time Yael came back into the room with the tea, Bar Elhanan had agreed to help Aziza. They told Yael she wanted to learn how to clean weaponry.

When Aziza prepared to go with the warriors the first time, Eran insisted on going with her. Even though Bar Elhanan had told her that she was still not a fit wife for Amram, he did tell her that she was not a woman but a warrior. Since the dog wouldn't leave Aziza's side, even when she tied him up, she loaded her belongings on him like one might a donkey. The warriors are headed toward Ein Gedi. Aziza understood how desperate the people were for food and supplies and knew they had to take what they could from other people. To her it was the same as she had done when she'd gone out with Nahara's father. One night, Aziza shot an ibex. Amram helped her butcher it, never recognizing who she was. Another night, Aziza discovered the Man from the Valley when she walked away from the camp to use the bathroom. She ran away when she heard the man chanting the song for the dead and saw him holding a thorn bush.

The following evening as the warriors were preparing for battle, Aziza was told there was not enough water for her dog. The Man from the Valley gave her his cup of water for the dog saying water didn't quench his thirst. He advised Aziza not to go on the raid that night. Aziza told him it was her duty to go. The Man from the North instructed her to



stand beside him. Before they began, the men vowed to take no slaves as they would not want that life for their own people. The battle went well and Aziza was proud of her abilities. As soon as the worst was over, Aziza looked up and was surprised to see the warriors were killing the women and children who were running from their homes. Eran was maddened by what he was seeing. Aziza suddenly realized they had no right to take what belonged to the people against whom they'd been in battle. Aziza stood, hoping to be killed, but the Man from the Valley grabbed her and pulled her away from the scene. She knew then that he knew she was a woman and that he'd realized what might happen that night. He also did not take part in killing the women and children, doing instead as God would have wanted him to do. At that time, he was the only warrior Aziza wanted standing beside her.

Aziza returned to the village only to retrieve her arrows while others were taking jewelry from the dead bodies. The others loaded up donkeys with the possessions they'd taken. Although she'd intended to sleep beside Amram that night and let him know who she was, she could not do so. She instead went to stand beside the Man from the Valley. She knew that each time she looked at Amram, she would see the face of a 4-year-old child he had killed. She spent the night with the Man from the Valley pulling him to her when he asked her if the world were not terrible.

Because Adir was still weak by the next time the warriors went out, Aziza and her mother agreed Aziza should once again take his place. Shirah and Ben Ya'ir no longer took the pains to keep their relationship covered but instead were seen together in public. Ben Ya'ir even began to eat at Shirah's house. Aziza and Adir would go outside to eat on those nights. One night when he left, Ben Ya'ir laid down a knife in front of the two, saying to neither in particular that when they went into battle they might need it. Adir took the knife, but gave it to Aziza after Ben Ya'ir left. Aziza gave the knife to her mother after a dove was found killed and mutilated outside her door.

In the month of Tishri Romans set up a camp in the valley below Masada. Amram sent a young girl to ask Aziza why she did not meet him at the fountain. She sent Amram a message with the girl that she had a fever. At a Rosh Chodesh celebration Aziza hid from Amram in the shadows. That night Aziza dreamed about her sister and went to the wall the following day to look for her. Knowing the Essene were starving, she gathered supplies and asked Yael to kill some doves for her. Aziza dressed like Adir to deliver the food. Adir suddenly realized why the men deemed him a war hero even though he hadn't been to war. He knew Aziza was taking his place and bringing him honor. Aziza thought to herself the things that she did while disguised as Adir. She had even accepted the amulet Amram wore that bore the image of Solomon.

When Aziza left to take the food to Nahara and the others, she was surprised the Man from the Valley followed her, offering to go with her to deliver the food. The Man from the Valley put the food down and one of the elders asked if they were expected to take the food from the hands of murderers. The Man from the Valley told him the food was from their brothers. The people were thin and weak. Aziza begged her sister to come with her but got no answer. The Man from the Valley tried as well. He said Abba had accepted the food and had blessed the Man from the Valley. Nahara had slipped up to



him and told him that she did remember her sister, and that she had belonged to her in another time and world. Aziza felt as if she had left her sister's fate behind and was no longer responsible for her.

On the way back, the two went to a cave where they made love to one another. When they left the cave the following morning, the Roman legions were arriving. They see the shape of a lion in the clouds of dust formed. Before they arrived at Masada, Aziza told the Man from the Valley that her real name was Rebekah. He shared that his was Yoav.

Analysis

Many references are made to omens and fate in this section of the novel. One of the most interesting refers to the dog that attached itself to Adir and Aziza after its master came to Masada to sell his wares. Aziza bought the dog from the man because she suspected he had been abused. She also believed the dog was an omen. Aziza admitted, however, she was unsure if the omen was a good one or a bad one. As she grew more accustomed to the dog and realized he was well behaved, Aziza believed the dog would bring them luck. Shirah's act of feeding the dog some of Adir's favorite foods may indicate that she saw some of her son in the dog.

Later, when Aziza was out preparing with the other warriors to attack a village, she noted that a mist had risen from the ground. The warriors believed this was a good omen, a sign they were in God's favor as the mist would help cover their approach.

In the idea that one's life was ruled by his fate, Aziza wondered if she was even supposed to still be alive as she watched the men she had fought beside killing the women and the children of the village. She wondered if it had really been her fate to die when she and her mother had been sent away from Jerusalem after she was first born.

Notice the strength that Aziza showed during this section of the novel. In order to protect her brother and keep him from getting hurt again, she disguised herself as him and went into battle. Aziza's time as a boy prepared her for the role she'd have to play among the men, pretending to be one of them. Even in her strength, Aziza was not prepared when she saw the men she had fought beside killing the women and children of the village. She'd thought nothing of attacking the village for the food and supplies they needed, the man who had raised her had done the same thing with his warriors. When she saw the innocent being slaughtered, Aziza had to take a step back. She realized there was really no context in which what they were doing was right. They had no right to take the things that belonged to the villagers and no right to kill people who meant them no harm.

Aziza found an unlikely companion in her distress over what was happening in the village. The Man from the Valley had already recognized she was a woman. He saw in her what none of the other men did. He at first suggested to her she not go to the attack, and then later when she insisted on going told her to stand beside him. Aziza wondered if he knew what was going to happen and anticipated how badly she would react to it. Notice that like Aziza, Yoav also refused to kill the women and children.



Notice that although it seemed the Man from the Valley was the most unlikely of people that Nahara would try to give a message to Aziza, he was the one she chose to tell that she did remember her sister, but that they had lived together in a different life. This was Nahara's way of relieving her sister from any responsibility she felt for her.

Although Yoav had made a promise to himself that he would never be with another woman after he lost Zara, he didn't feel as if he was breaking his promise when he was with Aziza because he did not consider her a warrior. She was instead a warrior, just like he was. Notice also that Yael's father paid Aziza a big compliment when he told her that she was a warrior when she finished her training with him. Like Yoav and the slave, Ben Elhanan saw in Aziza her capacity to be a great warrior.

One final thing to notice in this section is Amram's gift to Aziza. He still hadn't seen her for who she really was although she was fighting beside him. Aziza had saved Amram's life after he was hit by a rock during a battle. She had killed the man who intended to finish Amram off after he was stunned by the rock. When Amram thanked the warrior whom he believed was Adir, he gave him the amulet that Yael had originally given him when he first started in his father's profession.

Discussion Question 1

Why was it significant that Aziza was able to share with Yoav that her birth name was Rebekah?

Discussion Question 2

Are you surprised that Amram doesn't recognize Aziza for who she was? Why do you think he doesn't realize who she was?

Discussion Question 3

What is the dog's role in the novel? Aziza was uncertain when he came if he was a good omen or a bad one. Do you think the dog was a good or bad omen? Why?

Vocabulary

haggling, condiments, vigilance, stealth, skirmish, listless, preened, delegated, perilous, feign, admonish, introspection, obscured, demeanor, belied, subterfuge, callow, shrouded, elude, dissipated, massacre, meager, foretell, prone, plaintive



Part 4 (Shirah): Pages 453-497

Summary

Shirah remembers how her mother taught her everything she knows about magic and spells. When Shirah was a child they lived in a house meant for the holy women who worked for priests. Because women who practiced keshaphim were considered powerful and dangerous, the men of the church deemed them witches and made their practice unlawful. When women needed help the church was unwilling or unable to give, however, the women came to those who practiced keshaphim. She indicates these women believed there was a feminine aspect to God, one that included knowledge and compassion.

Shirah always went to the garden outside her mother's house when priests came to visit. On one hot day Shirah remembered jumping into the fountain in the garden because it was so hot. She felt at home there until a priest pulled her out. Although the priest was angry with Shirah, her mother looked at her strangely. Soon after that experience, her mother took her to visit the Nile River. Her mother told her that if water was her element she needed to learn to control it so that it didn't control her. Under the water, Shirah had the vision of a fish as large as a man. It swam close enough that she was able to stroke its scales with her hand. Shirah believed it was her beloved. When she surfaced, her mother asked if the fish had bitten her. She said that it would because everything love gave a person, it also took away. Her mother warned her not to get too far from water because it would cause her to lose her strength. Her mother also warned Shirah that desire was what caused a person to drown.

Now, Shirah felt her strength dwindling in the fortress in the desert. Her pregnancy has made her even more susceptible to the heat. She goes to the largest of the cisterns to get relief in the water that is left there. Ben Ya'ir will be waiting for her when she surfaces in the water. She believes he was the fish she saw in the Nile and is her fate.

She wondered where she might be if she could have learned to love Sa'adallos, the father of Nahara and Adir. She knew that if she had stayed with him, her children would be safe. She already knows they will not be able to escape the Romans when they attack the fortress. Already more than seven thousand men have come to fight against those at Masada. Shirah knew the men wanted to crush all of the rebellious warriors so there could be no chance of another uprising.

The soldiers brought with them a lion on a chain. This lion was seen as an omen of the Jews' fate. Yael had told Shirah she often dreamed of a lion. She was both afraid of the creature and drawn to it. She believed this was the waking version of her dream. The soldiers and their workers built a village in the desert below Masada. The smell of cooking food wafted up to the starving Jews. They built observation towers and a wall surrounding the plateau on which the fortress was built. As the building continued the Jews began to dread what was to come. They realized the life they had envisioned in



Masada, like the ones they had before the Romans came, would not come to pass. Eleazar tried to comfort the panicked people telling them they would not starve and that God was still with them.

Shirah first saw Eleazar in Jerusalem after she'd been sent there because women of the kedeshah were being thrown from their homes. Before Shirah had left her mother's house, she had been given the two gold amulets with instructions that only her daughters should get them as well as her book of spells and a box of herbs. Eleazar was already married when she met him. She knows they had no choice because it was their fate that they would find one another, he would ruin her and she wouldn't care.

At Masada, the people had been calmed after Eleazar read to them from the scriptures. They began looking for stones that could be used as weapons. Shirah looked at the camp, and at the cave where Nahara was staying. She hoped they would be safe there. The month of Shevat brought rain. The Jews thought the rain would slow the Romans but only seemed to make them work faster.

In the month of Adar, Shirah took Yael with her to cast the bones of a dove in the augurarium. Yael had learned well, as Shirah had known she would when she first saw her enter the Snake Gate. Shirah had been Yael's nursemaid. Eleazar's mother had sent Shirah to be a servant and Shirah was glad to be out of the house. Her aunt had realized what Shirah was when she saw her tattoos at the mikvah and the relationship between Shirah and Eleazar. Because Yael's father had given the child so little food, Shirah had stolen a silver cup to trade for new clothes, bedding and food for Yael. Even while she was caring for Yael, Shirah would slip out to see Eleazar. He would talk to her about his frustration with the ways of the Jewish priests. While his wife was away on a trip, Eleazar and Shirah were wed secretly.

Shirah took care of Yael until she became so big that Ben Elhanan noticed her pregnancy and made her leave. Eleazar had promised he would tell his parents about her but he could not bring himself to do so. Shirah thought he would divorce his wife and take her in but that did not happen as Channa came to him with proof Shirah had been in their bed. Eleazar was still young and didn't want to defy his parents but told Shirah he would plead to be allowed to take her as a second wife. Instead, Shirah stayed in a room behind the house that belonged to some women who practiced keshaphim. When Eleazar did not come for her, she begged the women for a love charm but the incantation bowl they fashioned broke while it was being fired. Those keshaphim women also served as Shirah's midwives when it came time for Rebekah to be born.

Because of her illegitimate child, Shirah had to testify in front of the church elders. Also she was able to drink the water containing the name of the Almighty without getting sick, the baby was proof she had been with a man. Eleazar's father had not allowed him to go to the hearing but Eleazar had gotten a messenger to deliver a cage of doves to Shirah. Those doves had been trained to return to him. Shirah had glued the pieces of the incantation bowl together but broke it when Eleazar called for her. She believed she



would not need to love charm any longer. She indicates that when she threw the dove bones she realized she was mistaken.

The warriors made a wager among themselves saying that whoever could free the lion the Romans had chained would bring the most glory to God. Warriors who had gone to the Roman camps to steal weapons had been killed, crucified where the people of Masada could see them. Although Adir wanted to fight, Aziza went in his place, leaving the dog to make sure Adir didn't leave the house. Yehuda was also called in to entertain him. Shirah was secretly glad Adir wasn't going to fight. She felt her daughter, who was made of iron, was better suited to fight. Meanwhile, the Romans had begun shooting flaming arrows at Masada. The people used what little water they had left to put out the fires that killed fruit trees.

Shirah said goodbye to Aziza before she went to battle, knowing she would lose her. She looked down at the Roman encampment to see the lion rolling in the mud, then she looked to see a goat on the mountainside that had gotten out of the cave in which the Essene were living. Shirah believed that goat was a sign of the darkness that was coming. A Roman soldier noticed the goat. He and his companions went after it. Yehuda came to stand beside Shirah as if he had been called. Aziza had to be restrained with ropes when she saw what was happening. They heard the screams of the Essene people as the Romans were killing them.

Analysis

This section begins the fourth part of the novel. This fourth part tells Shirah's story. One of the special areas of emphasis in this section of the novel is on the female aspects of religion. She discussed her mother's status as kedeshah. Although these women were once honored members of the church and assistants to the priests, the leaders of the church had decided that the kedeshah should be outlawed. This outlawing came between the time that Shirah's mother earned this status and the time she began teaching and tattooing her daughter in preparation for her career. The significance of the kedeshah was that these women were close to what was believed to be the feminine aspect of God. Ashtoreth, the idol that the other women had mentioned seeing in Shirah's home, was the idol that represented the feminine aspect of God. This idol, along with the idea that God had a feminine aspect and needed women to represent him, had been outlawed by the male church leaders.

The theme of Fate mixes with the importance of the lion as a symbol in the novel when the Romans brought a lion into their camp and chained it where those living in Masada could see it. The lion was a symbol of the ancient tribe of Judah. The Romans used it to give those people in Masada a visual image of what would soon happen to them. In this way, the lion represented the fate of the people who had taken refuge at Masada. An important thing to remember about this lion is the wager that the men made among themselves concerning it. After the lion had refused to eat the heads of the Jews given to it by the Romans, many of the warriors decided this was a sign that the lion was on



their side. They made a wager that whoever was able to free the lion from its chain would give great glory to God. This will be significant late in the novel.

Signs and omens continue to be important in this section of the novel. Notice that when the Roman soldiers came to set up their camp, they killed the birds in the area in the clouds of dust they stirred up. When Revka saw the dead black birds, she was reminded of the time before her daughter was killed when her grandsons had played with the feathers of the black birds that had been killed. Revka warned the others, based on her own experience, that there was no way they could escape from the danger that was coming their way. Another bad omen mentioned in this section of the novel came before Shirah had even given birth to Aziza. She had gone to the kedeshah hoping for a charm that would bind Ben Ya'ir to her. The incantation bowl the three women fashioned for her broke while it was being fired.

Perhaps the worst omen included in this section of the novel was that of the goat that had wandered out of the cave in which the Essene were living. Up to this point, the Romans had no idea those people were even there. When they saw the goat, however, they could not help but go after it. When they realized there were people living in the cave, those people, despite their innocence and their peaceful natures, were killed. Aziza had spotted the goat and knew what was about to happen but also knew there was nothing she could do about it. Because Aziza and her family could not go to the cave and bury Nahara's remains, they believed her spirit would wander the earth.

Ben Ya'ir as Shirah's fate. While Yael's great love was Ben Simon, represented by the lion; Shirah's was Ben Ya'ir, represented by the fish that she first caught sight of in the Nile River. Shirah knew it was her destiny that she would fall in love with Ben Ya'ir and that this love would ruin her. Shirah's fate also held that Shirah would not care that she would be undone by her love for Ben Ya'ir.

It is in this section of the novel that the reader finally understands why Shirah felt so close to Yael and was so comfortable in treating her like a daughter. Shirah was the nursemaid who took care of Yael when she was only a tiny child. Yael had been too young when Shirah left her to recognize Shirah or understand why she felt a connection to the woman when she met her again at Masada. As soon as Shirah had seen Yael walk through the gate at Masada, she had known the girl was the one to whom she'd served as a nursemaid. Because Shirah had helped Yael through her earliest months, Yael had been like a daughter to Shirah even though she hadn't given birth to her. Shirah was the only mother figure that Yael had ever known.

Discussion Question 1

Did you suspect the relationship between Shirah and Yael? Why or why not?



Discussion Question 2

Why do you think the kedeshah were outlawed from the church? Did the people treat the women who had once served in those professions fairly? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the importance of the lion that the Romans had chained in their camp.

Vocabulary

undermine, scarabs, expulsion, sorcery, accumulated, transcribed, gauge, incantations, treatise, sage, harlots, mantle, expulsion, dissolution, consolation, sect, imprinted, intricate, tendrils, alight, defiant, drone, pagans, destination, serrations, vigilant, derives, susceptible, pungent, rival, procurator, aloofness, periphery, legionnaire, reprieve, sated, affront, gauntlet, prostate, perilous, psalm, oppression, iniquity, wrath, etched, tedious, volley, catapulted, abide, tyrant, recourse, beset, bereft, adjure, shard, disheveled, submerged, expel, ravaged, wager, ruefully, mayhem, cleft, debased, ascent



Part 4 (Shirah): Pages 497-542

Summary

Shirah mourned the loss of her daughter because she believed she was the one who caused her death by following Eleazar. She wondered for the first time if she had been wrong not to love Nahara's father or at least offer her loyalty in return for his. She made an oath of vengeance against the Romans and offered herself to God in exchange for keeping the rest of her children safe. Because the Romans had determined they couldn't reach Masada using the Snake Path, they decided to make their own road. The people in the fortress were amazed that the Romans were able to build their road so high and so quickly.

Shirah remembered the last time she has seen Channa, when she was being escorted out of Jerusalem, she was most embarrassed by her bare feet. The dog howled when Channa came to visit. Channa claimed to have come for a spell of protection for her husband but Shirah wondered if she was still trying to trap her. Channa said the warriors were going to try to stop the building of the wall and that they would not return. She had seen in a vision that her husband would survive only with the help of a black bird. When Shirah asked Channa if she'd ever considered she was just a child when Channa sent her to die, Channa told her she should have allowed Shirah to be taken into their house as it would not only have given Shirah a husband but her children.

Yael talked her brother into allowing her and Shirah to go outside Masada's gates to look for herbs. Shirah knew where wild rhododendron was growing. They found honey made by bees from the pollen of these flowers which contained poison. Yael insisted that she'd had a vision telling her she was to be the one to deliver the honey to the Romans. This was why she'd brought her father's cloak with her. Shirah gave Yael her second gold amulet to wear. Shirah waited for Yael to come back, but she did not return quickly. Shirah began to panic but saw Yael headed toward the lion. Shirah was afraid she would see Yael torn apart by the lion. Instead, she got close enough that she was able to unhook the lion's collar from its chain. Instead of attacking her, the lion stood before her. She had to raise her arms to make him run away from his captors. Shirah believed she had witnessed a miracle as Yael made her way back to Masada, a warrior whom Shirah considered the bravest of them all.

That night the Masada warriors killed many of the Romans who had been intoxicated by the honey, which they had used to make mead. The next morning, the residents of Masada were surprised to see the lion had been freed. The Romans, however, had built their ramp close enough to the fortress that they could do major damage to the fortification by starting fires and throwing stones. Eleazar had stopped telling the people they could live as many as two years on the supplies they had at Masada while they waited for the Romans to realize a siege was not practical. Shirah felt she was losing Eleazar again. Even though she felt unprotected without the amulets she usually wore, she thought she was safe with Eleazar.



Eleazar and Shirah spent the night together. When they woke, they discovered the Romans had finished their ramp. Silva, the Romans' leader had asked to talk to Ben Ya'ir promising if they surrendered, the people would be allowed to go free. It was the same promise he'd made to another group of Zealots but had gone back on his promise. The warriors, Aziza included sent arrows down on Silva and the others. She had told her mother she would not shoot any many in a blue robe as he might be the man who was Nahara and Adir's father. Shirah believes her greatest gift to her daughter was her name, one that would allow her to be fearless.

Because the Romans were not able to make their ramp reach the walls of Masada they built a platform on which they built a tall tower so they could shoot over the walls of Masada but still be protected. Those in the fortress ran out of linen in which to wrap the dead. Aziza and the Man from the Valley ate their meals together. Revka, who had come to live with Shirah, told Shirah that her son-in-law had promised never to take another woman into his bed and never to cut his hair. When he came one night with his head shaven Revka knew that he believed it was time for him to die. Shirah realized that love had not led her daughter to ruin but to her destiny because by not being completely a woman, she was able to give comfort to the man who'd sworn never to love another woman.

The Romans broke through the walls of Masada with a battering ram. Eleazar ordered another wall be built, this one of made of mud and grass so it would give when hit by the ram. As she watched the wall being built, Shirah also saw the angel of death hovering over them. She looked for Eleazar and found him crying in her garden. She knew her fate was to die, drowning in her own blood when her throat was cut. Before she died, Shirah wanted to give birth to her baby. Yael came to help Shirah as she had promised she would do. The baby was born after a hard labor. Although Shirah bled badly, the baby was not weak. Shirah named the baby Yonah.

Even though the Romans were not able to break the new wall built by those at Masada, they were able to set it on fire. As Shirah looked at the devastation, she noticed Channa crouched in her garden. She said the doves from the cage had come back to tell her of the birth but that she had told no one, even her husband so he would not be distracted. Channa cried with joy when she saw the baby. They rejoiced over the baby together putting away their hate for each other.

The wall continued to burn and finally completely caught fire. Yael and the others gathered in Shirah's home. When Eleazar called the people together in the courtyard Shirah went even though she was still bleeding. Ben Ya'ir instructed the people that they should honor God and die as free men. He said that even though they couldn't defeat the Romans, they could deny them a victory. All of the things they owned were heaped in a pile and burned. Ten men were chosen as executioners who would slit the throats of the people. Of these 10, one would kill the other nine, them himself, taking all of the blame onto himself.

Yael, Arieah, Revka, her grandsons, Shirah and Yehuda all gathered in Shirah's house. When Shirah learned Adir had gone after Aziza she gave Yael her book of spells and



her baby, asking her to keep them safe. She went to find Aziza, Adir and Eleazar. Yael asked Shirah not to go to Eleazar but Shirah gave her a pomegranate, the same fruit she'd given Yael when she left her as a child. Yael recognized who she was. Shirah told Yael that if she saw a sign from the doves she was to take the others and go to the place where Revka first saw that Shirah was indeed a kedishah.

Shirah followed the sound of Eran's barking and found Aziza. Amram came up behind her and slit her throat. He realized who she was for the first time when he saw the silver amulet at her throat and cried. Adir beat Amram with his crutch for murdering his sister. Amram slit the boy's throat as well. Eran stood over Aziza's body, refusing to move even though Amram hit him with his spear enough times to kill the dog. The dog grabbed onto Amram, refusing to let go. When he saw what had happened, the Man from the Valley slit the dog's throat, but left Amram suffering with his wounds until he died. Yoav then furthered Amram's disgrace by cutting his armor off him. When Yoav left, Shirah tended to the bodies of her children.

Shirah went to the dovecotes and chased out the doves, watching them as they flew against the dark sky. Eleazar met Shirah at her house. No one else was there, Yael had taken the others as she had promised Shirah she would do. After the two said their goodbyes, Eleazar cut Shirah's throat, causing her to drown in her own blood.

Analysis

The final days of the people who lived in the stronghold at Masada are outlined in this section of the novel. Because he knew there was no way they could be victorious against the Romans who were bearing down upon them, Ben Ya'ir told his followers the best thing they could do was to kill themselves, not allowing the Romans to conquer them or take them as slaves.

Of particular importance in this section of the novel is Yael's act of setting the lion that had been chained in the Roman's camp, free. The men had at one point made a wager among themselves that whoever could set this lion free would bring the most glory to God. It is ironic that it was not a man, but a woman who wound up accomplishing this great feat. The men had never considered that it might not be one of them but instead one of what they considered the weaker sex who completed the task of freeing the lion. When the people of Masada saw that the lion had been freed, they believed it was a good omen, sent from God. They never considered that any one among them had set the creature free but instead assumed it was an angel who had done the task.

Another important aspect to notice in this section of the novel relates to the theme of Women. Notice the change in Channa's attitude toward Shirah. This change in attitude seemed to begin when Channa came to Shirah for help in protecting her husband when he went out to battle the Romans. Notice Channa's manner of dress and compare it to the way Shirah was dressed when Channa sent her away. Shirah had noted that she was most embarrassed the morning she and her baby were loaded into the cart because she had no shoes. She also wore only a black scarf wound around her body to



cover herself. As Channa watched Shirah's disgrace, she wore elaborate jewelry and fine sandals. When Channa came to Shirah for help in protecting her husband, she wore no shoes and only a black scarf. It was as if Channa was communicating to Shirah through her clothing that she understood where Shirah had been on the day. She realized what it was like to feel totally alone and afraid for her life. This act of humbling herself is Channa's way of apologizing to Shirah. Channa admitted to Shirah it would have been better for both of them if she had allowed Shirah to be taken into their family. Not only would it have given Channa children, it would have given Shirah a husband. Later, on the night of the massacre, the two women were able to set aside their differences enough that they both rejoiced over the birth of Shirah's baby.

Discussion Question 1

Do you think Ben Ya'ir suggestion to the people that they kill themselves instead of allowing the Romans to take them captive was the best option? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Consider the implications of the massacre at Masada taking place on the day before Passover. Why was this significant?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Yael's ability to set the lion free. How do you think she was able to do this? What did her act symbolize?

Vocabulary

keening, brutal, invoke, debate, amend, asunder, ensnare, fallow, plaintive, arrogant, demeanor, toxic, tarried, maul, mead, haunches, chinking, pliant, gaunt, disparaged, edifice, extinction, inferno, ardor, rapture, violation, rampage, vermilion



Alexandria (Yael)

Summary

Yael and the others were saved from the death at Masada because they immersed themselves in the cistern. Now she lives in Alexandria. A white ibis watches over Yael and her family. Yael believes it embodies the spirit of Shirah. She and Revka still have nightmares about their time in Masada when their lives were ruled by war. Women come to her wanting charms and amulets. Although she is surrounded by water, Yael longs for the desert. The birds still come to her when she sits in darkness. It was the doves that saved her.

They had been waiting in Shirah's house, hoping she would come soon. It was then that they saw the doves flying. Yael believed it was a message that they were supposed to survive. Revka was surprised when Yael told her they had no time for death. Although they'd been told to sacrifice themselves, Yael can't bring herself to do so because of the children. They went through an underground passageway that led them into the outside courtyard. They stayed in the shadows as they ran for the largest cistern, the place where Revka had seen Shirah as herself. Yael saw her father's body and knelt to close his eyes. She felt he had finally been reunited with her mother again. She took his cloak.

They saw some families still waiting for the death giver to come. A noise alerted Uri, one of the death givers to them. They ran but Revka was not able to keep up and Uri grabbed her. Using the knife Ben Simon had given her, Yael stabbed Uri in the back. Uri turned to Yael but before he could hurt her the Man from the Valley killed him. Yael noticed that man had been marked as the one who would kill himself after all others were dead. He told Yael that he left his children to her care. He breathed into his hand and then grasped Yael's hand, telling her to have Revka kiss her hand, returning Zara's spirit to her mother. They spent the night in the cistern, still there when the day of Passover dawned.

They were alarmed when they heard voices. Four Roman soldiers found them. Yael believed they might have been killed if the soldiers had not been shaken because they found all of the people dead and their possessions destroyed. The two women and five children were brought before Silva. Yael wondered if they had something Silva wanted as he had not already ordered them killed.

Hearing one of the men refer to her as a weed, Yael spoke to the men in their language. They were shocked that she could speak Greek and also that she had the courage to speak to them. Yael believed she had survived her incident with the lion because she had told it her name, making her belong to him. She now told Silva that she was Shirah, Ben Ya'ir's closest companion. She alone could tell them the story of what had happened there. She removed the lion's collar from her arm and asked the men if they



recognized it. She promised to tell Silva her story if he would let her, Revka and the children live.

After they'd told their story at Jerusalem so it could be recorded and people knew the Zealots had refused to be defeated they were left outside the city's walls. Yael sold Shirah's amulet to pay their way to Alexandria. Yehuda stayed with them until he was a man and his people called for him. Revka cried when he left. Noah and Levi have become bakers. Arie is an excellent scholar but is plagued by nightmares. Every year on the anniversary of the day the fortress fell, Shirah tells the story of the lion who is king of his own freedom. She and Yonah walk into the waters of the Nile they light a candle on a lotus leaf and let it float down the river giving thanks and honor to their mothers.

Analysis

This section, entitled "Alexandria" seems to act almost as a postlude to the novel. Since the last section of the story was told by Shirah, that story ended when Shirah died. Yael again narrates this last section. She has taken the identity of Shirah. The major difference in this section is that it is written in the present tense. The rest of the novel leading up to this section was written in the past tense.

The idea that when one changes his name he also changes his fate surfaces again in this section of the story. When Yael talked to the Roman general, she told him that her name was Shirah. She believed that by taking on the identity of the woman who'd been closest to Ben Ya'ir, she had given the general a more viable reason to believe her story. It appears that Yael took on not only Shirah's name but also her profession. As she narrates the remainder of the story from her home in Alexandria, she writes that she is known as the Witch of Moab, a name by which Shirah was known. Just like a daughter might have done, Yael has continued Shirah's practice of keshaphim. Even though Yael believed it was by changing her name she also changed her fate, she writes in the beginning of this section that even her change in fate was laid out before she was ever born.

Adding to the theme of Religion is the irony that the massacre at Masada occurred on the night before Passover. Passover is a traditional Jewish holiday in which the people celebrate their freedom from slavery in Egypt. The people killed in the massacre were not slaves, but they were freed from the bonds of the Earth. They also proved to the Romans that they did not have to allow themselves to be taken into slavery again.

Notice in this section the reference to the idea that silence means that one has been removed from the sight of God. Consider also the sign that Shirah gave Yael that it was time for her and the others to seek shelter in the cistern. She went into the dovecote and forced all the doves to fly out, a sign she knew Yael couldn't miss. Since Yael had worked so closely with the birds, Yael would know it was unnatural for the birds to take flight at night unless something had spooked them.



Notice that when Yael and Revka escape from the massacre, that Yael does so for the same reason that she forced herself to go to Masada even though she wanted to stay in the desert with Ben Simon's bones. Yael wanted to live because she wanted the children to live. She knew that she was going against Ben Ya'ir's commands by hiding and avoiding death, but believed God could forgive her that shortcoming as he had forgiven her sins in the past.

Not only does Yael impress the Roman people by telling them that she was Ben Ya'ir's companion, she impresses them by being able to understand and speak in their languages. Yael also shares her secret with her reader, the secret of how she managed to free the lion. She said that went to the beast, unafraid, and she spoke to it, telling it her name. Once she had done so, she believed the lion belonged to her. She treated the Roman general in the same way. Yael also showed the Roman general the collar she had taken from the lion they'd had chained in their camp when she set it free.

Discussion Question 1

Why were the Romans so distraught when they saw what had happened at Masada?

Discussion Question 2

How was Yael able to earn the respect of the Roman general? How did changing her name to Shirah change her fate?

Discussion Question 3

Are you satisfied with the ending of the book? Why was it significant that Yael carried on Shirah's work as a kedeshah?

Vocabulary

disruptions, violations, confide, divination, alabaster, incessant, petty, martyred, treachery, diligent, dank, ajar, serene, dispatched, oblige, languid, whelps, defame, orb, imbuing



Characters

Yael

Yael is the daughter of the assassin Yosef bar Elhanan. Her mother died in childbirth. For this reason, Yael's father resented her and blamed her for her mother's death. Yael was the younger sister of Amram. Yael really had no mother figure with the exception of Shirah who served as her nursemaid for a short while before it was discovered that Shirah was pregnant. In Jerusalem Yael kept to herself. People looked at her strangely because she had red hair and freckles. She didn't think she would ever have a man approach her as a suitor because her father was an assassin. After her father killed an important Roman official, he was forced to flee from Jerusalem. Yael was surprised that he allowed her to come along. She had almost expected him to leave her to die in Jerusalem.

Yael and her father joined Ben Simon and his family as they fled Jerusalem. They were headed through the desert to a Sicarri stronghold to which Yael's brother had fled earlier. Ben Simon was a friend of Amram. Amram had expected Ben Simon would protect his sister in the desert but instead the man seduced Yael even though he was already married. For years Yael had dreams of a lion. When she met Ben Simon, who had a scar on his face where he'd been bitten by a lion, Yael believed Ben Simon was her destiny. However, Ben Simon and his family became sick in the desert. Even though Yael tried to find a cure for them, all four family members died. Yael wanted to stay and die where Ben Simon had died but she realized she was pregnant with Ben Simon's baby and went on through the desert because of that baby.

When they reached Masada, Yael was chosen to work in the dovecote. She felt strangely attracted to Shirah though she didn't realize the woman had once been her nursemaid. When Yael went into premature labor, she went to Shirah, whom she knew practiced keshaphim to help her. Shirah warned Yael that if she was not able to make peace with Sia's ghost that Sia would take her baby. Yael did as Shirah instructed her and her baby was born healthy and at the proper time. Through their work in the dovecotes, Shirah and Yael became very close. When Yael's baby was born, both Shirah's daughters were jealous because Shirah gave Yael one of the gold amulets she wore around her neck. It was indicated those amulets were gifts that should have only been given to a daughter from a mother. Meanwhile, Yael began learning the craft of keshaphim from Shirah. On the night of the massacre at Masada, Shirah entrusted her book of spells and her baby to Yael.

On the following morning, Yael, Revka and five children were discovered by the Roman soldiers to be the only ones alive at the fortification. In order to make her story more believable for the Roman general, Yael told the man that she was Shirah, Ben Ya'ir's closest companion. She told the Romans the story of the massacre at Masada in exchange for her life and the lives and those with her. She and the other survivors



moved to Alexandria where Yael continued to practice keshaphim. She became known as the Witch of Moab, a name once used to refer to Shirah.

Shirah

Shirah is the mother of Aziza, Nahara, Adir and Yonah. As a young girl, Shirah began her training in the keshaphim. Her mother had also been a kedeshah in the city of Alexandria. When the keshaphim was made illegal in that city, as it had been in Jerusalem, Shirah's mother sent the girl away to her family in Jerusalem. Even though the kedeshah had once been respected workers in the temple, women who assisted the priests, they became disgraced, known as little more than prostitutes. In Jerusalem, Shirah met her cousin Ben Ya'ir who was her destiny. She had seen Ben Ya'ir in a vision in the Nile River when her mother took her there to see if water was truly her element. Ben Ya'ir had appeared to her as a huge fish. He was her destiny. She knew that she would love him, this love would ruin her and she would not care.

In Jerusalem, Shirah's aunt not only saw Shirah's tattoos and realized she was being trained in the keshaphim but also realized Shirah was having an affair with Ben Ya'ir. She sent Shirah out of their house. Shirah got a job as Yael's nursemaid but was made to quit that job when it was realized she was pregnant. After the baby, Rebekah whose name was later changed to Aziza, was born, Ben Ya'ir was afraid to approach his parents about allowing Shirah to be his second wife and his first wife, Channa insisted Shirah be sent away. Shirah and the baby were saved by Sa'adallos, a Moabite tribesman, who bought Shirah as a wife. It was while Shirah and her baby were living with Sa'adallos that they were attacked by bandits. Shirah was so upset by the attack and by her weakness as a woman that she changed her baby's name from Rebekah to Aziza and raised the child as a boy. Shirah had two more children, Nahara and Adir by Sa'adallos.

Even though Sa'adallos was a good husband and good father to her children, Shirah continued to receive messages from Ben Ya'ir using doves he had trained to return to him. Shirah left Sa'adallos with no explanation and took the children with her to Masada, where Ben Ya'ir was the leader of a group of religious zealots. Shirah continued to practice keshaphim at Masada even though it was rumored she was a witch. Shirah was one of the women who worked in the dovecote where she was reunited with Yael even though she did not tell anyone about her previous relationship with the girl. While at Masada, Shirah got pregnant again by Ben Ya'ir. Even though the baby was not ready to be delivered the night of the massacre, Shirah forced herself to go into labor early, not wanting her baby to have no name. Although Shirah died in the massacre, as her fate foretold, Shirah's baby was taken by Yael to the cistern. That baby was among the seven who survived at Masada.



Aziza

Aziza was the daughter of Shirah and Ben Ya'ir. At birth she had been given the name of Rebekah. The religious leaders in Jerusalem sent Aziza and her mother into the wilderness because Shirah was an unwed mother. Sa'adallo, a tribesman from Moab, purchased Shirah and took her as a wife. He allowed Aziza to come along. After she and her mother were attacked by bandits Shirah changed the child's name to Aziza and had her dress as a boy. Through her developmental years, Aziza lived as a boy. She rode horses, learned the basics of weaponry and fighting from Sa'adallo and learned to cover up her developing female body. When Shirah received a message from Ben Ya'ir instructing her to come to Masada, Shirah had Aziza begin dressing and trying to act like a girl again. Because of the way she was raised, Aziza could not cook or sew. She was more suited to the activities of a boy but it was unlawful for her to even touch weaponry because she was female.

When Aziza learned her father was Ben Ya'ir, she entered an archery competition hoping to win his praise. Instead, the other men in the contest thought she was Adir. Because of her actions, Adir was incorporated into the force of warriors early because it was believed it was such a talented warrior. Adir was badly injured during his first battle. To keep her brother from being injured further, Aziza dressed as him and fought in his place. As Aziza became more comfortable in her role as a warrior, she was increasingly unhappy with the way Amram, her boyfriend, treated her. Even though she fought by his side and was even given an amulet worn by him because she saved his life, Amram did not recognize her for who she was. Aziza was endeared to Yoav, known as the Man from the Valley, when he stood with her watching as the other warriors killed the women and children of a village they'd just raided. Yoav recognized Aziza was a woman, but still a warrior. He had sworn he would never have another woman in his bed after his wife, Zara, was killed. Because Aziza was more like a fellow warrior than a woman, she was able to bring comfort to Yoav.

The Man from the Valley (aka Yoav)

Yoav, who became known only as the Man from the Valley after his wife was killed, was a serious student of the Bible. After the death of his wife, however, Yoav lost his faith in God. He turned into a hardened warrior who wanted revenge against the Romans. Yoav punished himself by wrapping his arms in metal straps that would cut into his skin. He also refused to wear armor when going into battle almost as if he wanted to be killed. Yoav was the only warrior among those at Masada who realized it was not Adir among their ranks but instead his sister, Aziza. The Man from the Valley told Aziza that he should stand next to him when the battle began because he wanted to protect her. After Aziza saw the other warriors killing the women and children from the village while the Man from the Valley refused to do so, he was the only one that Aziza wanted to stand beside.



Although Yoav had declared he would never take another woman into his bed he was able to have a relationship with Aziza because she was something other than a woman since she'd spent several years of her childhood pretending to be a boy. The night that the Romans breached the wall at Masada, Revka knew the end was near because Yoav cut his hair, something he'd said he would never do. Yoav played an important part in the massacre because he was the one who was chosen to kill the nine assassins in charge of killing all the people at Masada. Yoav would have to kill himself, an act that was considered a sin by the Jews. Before he died, however, Yoav transferred Zara's last breath, the one that Revka gave him just after Zara died, back to Revka so that she could have her daughter with her.

Amram

Amram is Yael's older brother and the son of Yosef bar Elhanan. When he got old enough Amram followed the steps of his father who was an assassin with the Sicarii, a religion Zealot group. Amram gained a name for himself and had to flee Jerusalem because he was a wanted man after having killed so many Romans. Before he left Jerusalem, Amram gave Yael the gift of a blue silk scarf. Amram took refuge at Masada where a square of this scarf floated to him, letting him know that his sister and father were still alive. He sent two warriors out to look for them. When they were located the warriors told Yael and her father that Hol, Amram's nickname that was also the name of the phoenix, had sent them.

At Masada Amram earned a reputation as a great warrior. He also found love with Aziza, Shirah's oldest daughter. As he became more hardened as a warrior, Amram seemed to change. Aziza began to wonder if he saw her only as just a pretty woman or if he could ever accept her for the warrior she was. At the end of the novel, it was Amram who snuck up behind Aziza and slit her throat. When he saw that amulet with the image of Solomon on it that he had believed he had given Adir, he realized who Aziza really was. Eran, Aziza's dog attacked Amram when he killed Aziza. Eran injured Amram fatally. The Man from the Valley saw what happened and cut the dog's throat, giving it a respectful death. The Man from the Valley allowed Amram to die naturally, indicating he believed Amram was a disgraceful warrior.

Revka

Revka was the wife of a baker. She and her family lived in the Valley of Cypresses before the Romans attacked the city. Revka's husband was one of the men killed by the Romans during the attack. Revka, her daughter, son-in-law and grandsons escaped into the desert. They set up camp near an oasis. It was at this oasis that several Roman soldiers attacked Zara while Zoav was praying in the desert. Revka hid her grandsons behind a waterfall so they would not be hurt but she could not save her daughter, Zara, from being raped and tortured by the soldiers. Revka granted her daughter's wish by slitting her throat, putting her out of her misery. Revka also got her revenge on the



Roman soldiers by feeding them break poisoned with hemlock. By the time Yoav returned from the desert, the soldiers were dead.

At Masada, Revka was assigned to work at the dovecote. At first she thought she was being punished but came to like the women with whom she worked. Shirah helped Revka forgive herself and also gave her an incantation bowl to help her grandsons recover their voices. Yael came to live in Revka's house after Yael and her father fought because of Yael's pregnancy. When Revka first met Yael, she resented the girl, who was the same age as Zara because she was alive. She also thought Yael believed she was too good to work in the dovecote. Revka is one of the few people who survived the massacre at Masada even though she was grabbed by Uri and almost killed before Yael stabbed Uri. Yoav finished off Uri before Uri could hurt his mother-in-law.

Yosef bar Elhanan

Yosef bar Elhanan was father to Yael and Amram. Although he loved his son, Yosef bar Elhanan could not stand his daughter because his wife died giving birth to her. Every time he saw the girl, who had the same color hair as her mother, he remembered what he had lost. Bar Elhanan blamed Yael for her mother's death. He hired a nursemaid to take care of the child but still allotted very little food for her and made her sleep in the hallway of the house. He was an assassin for the Sicarii and owned a cloak rumored to be made of spiders' webs. This cloak, along with Ben Elhanan's special abilities gave him the unique talent of being able to become invisible. It was said that was why he was able to sneak up on his victims and kill them so efficiently.

Although he'd been a legendary assassin in Jerusalem, Yosef bar Elhanan was just considered a washed up old man at Masada. He was given the task of keeping an account of the weaponry, cleaning and repairing it. When Yael's baby was born, the old man made amends with his daughter and was the one to circumcise his grandson. Aziza went to Yosef bar Elhanan when she wanted to learn to be invisible. Bar Elhanan taught her well. At the end of their lessons, the old warrior told Aziza she was indeed a warrior. On the night of the massacre at Masada, Yael saw her father's dead body. She thought he looked happier because he had finally been reunited with his wife than he ever was while she knew him alive.

The Man from the North (aka Wynn)

The Man from the North was a man who was captured by the warriors at Masada and kept as a slave. The man was assigned to work in the dovecote where he fell in love with Yael. Yael took to leaving the slave's chains unlocked so he could move around the dovecote freely. She also brought him food because she knew he wasn't getting enough rations and even killed a dove for him even though this was considered a sin. When the Man from the North was playing with Ariele one day, he told the boy that his name was Wynn. After this, Wynn was caught sneaking to Yael's house across the plaza. He was locked up in a cell and left to die. Yael used her baby as a pawn to ensure that Channa,



the wife of Ben Ya'ir, would allow her to take food to Wynn. Yael and Aziza were finally successful in putting together a plan to sneak Wynn out of Masada using the invisibility cloak owned by Yael's father. Wynn intended to go back to his homeland but it is never learned if Wynn arrived safely there.

Channa

Channa was Eleazar ben Ya'ir's wife. She was the one who insisted that Shirah be sent away when it was found that Shirah was pregnant with Eleazar ben Ya'ir's baby. Through her life, Channa never had a child of her own. Although Shirah warned Revka against it, Revka used Yael's baby as a bargaining chip to try to keep the Man from the North from being killed. Although Channa did agree to keep the man alive, she stole Yael's baby. Yael was able to get him back only after Shirah agreed to perform an exorcism on Channa. Channa later admitted to Shirah that she should have taken Shirah in when she was found to be pregnant instead of sending her away. If Channa had done that, the two would have been sisters and the children and Ben Ya'ir considered the property of both women.

Uri

Uri was one of the two soldiers who found Yael and her father after Yael put out the squares of her blue scarf to help her and her father find their way back to the place they'd left Ben Simon and his family. Later, Uri was the soldier that Channa assigned to keep Yael from coming inside Channa's residence to get her baby. Even though Uri was a friend of Amram's, he would not allow Yael into the house. Later, Uri was one of the men chosen to slit the throats of the people who had taken refuge at Masada. He spied Yael, Revka and the children as they made their way to the cistern. He was able to grab Revka and was preparing to slit her throat when Yael attacked him from behind with the knife that had belonged to Ben Simon. The Man from the Valley finished Uri off so the women and children could hide as they had planned.

Jachim ben Simon

Jachim ben Simon was Sicarri warrior who helped teach Amram what he knew about being an assassin. It was in Ben Simon's care that Amram left his sister and father when he realized they would need to leave Jerusalem. Instead of caring for her in the way that Amram had hoped, Ben Simon instead seduced Yael and began to have an affair with her. Yael believed he was the lion she had always seen in her dreams. The idea that he was this lion was backed up by his story that he'd been bitten on the face by a lion but had survived the encounter. When Amram learned that it was Ben Simon who had gotten his sister pregnant, he was at first angry. Yael helped him to understand that she was happy to be carrying Ben Simon's baby. After Ben Simon's sons by his wife, Sia, became sick with a fever in the desert, Ben Simon also caught the disease and died.



Eleazar ben Ya'ir

Eleazar ben Ya'ir was the husband of Channa and Shirah. He was the father of Aziza and Yonah. He was the cousin of Shirah, the one to whom it was foretold that Channa would fall in love with. Her love for Ben Ya'ir would lead to her destruction but Shirah would not care, her fortune stated. Ben Ya'ir was a convincing and charismatic person who could easily convince people to follow him. For this reason he had brought a good deal of followers to Masada with him to try to hold out against the Romans. When he realized that his men couldn't stand against the Romans, it was Ben Ya'ir who convinced them that they needed to kill themselves rather than allow the Romans to kill them or take them as slaves. Ben Ya'ir was among those killed in the massacre that night.

Sia

Sia was the wife of Ben Simon. She tried to befriend Yael but Yael preferred the company of Sia's husband. Sia began avoiding Yael when she realized Yael was having an affair with her husband. Sia died in the desert of the same disease that killed her sons and her husband. Before she died, Sia asked Yael to take care of Ben Simon. After her death, Sia appeared as a ghost to Yael. The ghost followed her to Masada. Shirah told Yael she believed it was because of Sia's ghost that Yael was in danger of miscarrying her baby. She believed that Sia intended to take Yael's baby as repayment for Yael taking her husband. After Yael begged Sia's ghost for forgiveness and symbolically returned Ben Simon to her, Sia left Yael.

The Baker

The term "The Baker" is the only one ever used to refer to Revka's husband. His proper name is never given. He is described as being a man who was dedicated to his work as a baker and rarely got involved in other peoples' problems. He went one day to take his first loaves of bread as an offering at the synagogue as was his custom and was convinced to become part of a group going to the Romans to plead for their homes to be spared. The Baker never returned from this meeting. Revka learned he had been killed with the other village members and their bodies set on fire by the Romans. Revka believed her husband spoke to her through a dream and gave her the idea of poisoning the soldiers who raped and tormented Zara with bread laced with hemlock.

Zara

Zara was the daughter of Revka and the Baker. She was the wife of Yoav, who became known as the Man from the Valley. Zara and Yoav had two sons, Noah and Levi. After Zara and her family fled from the Valley of Cypresses, Zara was attacked by a group of Romans. Those Romans raped and tortured her resulting in her death. When she killed daughter, Revka captured Zara's last breath, which was believed to contain that



person's spirit, in her own mouth. She transferred this spirit to Yoav so he could have Zara with him wherever he went. Before he was to kill himself on the night of the Romans' attack on Masada, Yoav transferred Zara's spirit back to her mother so that Zara could live on through her.

Sa'adallos

Sa'adallos was a tribesman from Moab who bought Shirah as a wife after she was driven out of Jerusalem when it was discovered she was pregnant. Sa'adallos became the man that Aziza thought of as her father even though he was not her biological father. Sa'adallos was Nahara's biological father. When Shirah got word from Eleazar ben Ya'ir that she was to come to him from Iron Mountain, she left Sa'adallos and took the children. She later wondered if she should have given the man more respect and love than she actually did as he took such good care of her and her children. She also wondered if things might have turned out differently for her and her children if she had stayed with Sa'adallos instead of leaving him for Ben Ya'ir.

Eran

Eran is the Mastiff dog who took a liking to Aziza. He went with her into battle when she dressed in Adir's clothes. Because he insisted on going with her, Aziza used Eran like a donkey, strapping her weapons and spare arrows to him. Although Eran disliked Amram and growled at him, he did not growl at the Man from the Valley. Shirah was able to find Aziza the night of the massacre because she heard the dog barking and howling when Amram snuck up behind Aziza and killed her. Eran attacked Amram wanting revenge for Aziza's death. When the Man from the Valley saw that both the dog and Amram were mortally wounded, he cut the dog's throat, giving it an honorable death but left Amram to die in a dishonorable and painful fashion.

Tamar bat Aaron

Tamar was a woman among the Essene people who Yael and her father discovered as they traveled through the desert looking for a cure for the fever with which the members of Ben Simon's family suffered. Tamar gave Yael fresh clothes as well as food for their journey. Later, when a group of Essene people came to Masada seeking refuge, Yael recognized Tamar. At Masada, Yael took food and supplies to Tamar in return for the kindness the woman had shown to her. When the Essene people decided to leave Masada because they did not want to witness the violence they feared was coming Tamar left her son, Yehuda, behind because she wanted him to be safe.

Flavius Silva

Flavius Silva was the leader of the soldiers of the Tenth Legion as they approached Masada. He was the newly appointed Roman governor. It was to Silva that Yael told the



story of how she, Revka and the five children had survived the massacre. Yael also told Silva that she was the Witch of Moab, the intimate friend of Eleazar ben Ya'ir, to make her story more believable. It was when Silva saw the lion's collar that Yael had taken from the neck of the lion the Romans had chained in their camp that Silva was willing to allow Yael and the others to live in exchange for their account of what happened.

Malachi ben Aaron

Malachi ben Aaron was one of the young Essene men who came to live at Masada. He often worked in the dovecotes. Nahara befriended him and the two often talked and spent their noon break together. Malachi had been chosen to take over the place of the Essene's highest leader when that leader died. Shirah made Malachi leave the dovecotes because she saw how close Nahara was getting to the young man. Despite Shirah's attempt to discourage the two Nahara and Malachi were married and Nahara became a member of the sect.

Adir

Adir is Shirah's son. Even though he was little more than a young boy, he wanted to be a great warrior. Adir was accepted among the warriors after his sister competed in an archery contest disguised as Adir. They believed he was the one who had done so well at archery and sent him into battle even though he was only 13. During his first foray into battle, Adir was badly injured. Aziza kept her brother from further harm by dressing up like him and going in his place.

Nahara

Nahara was the daughter of Shirah and Sa'adallos. Even though her mother and sister didn't approve of Nahara's decision, she joined a group of Essene who took refuge for a short while at Masada. Nahara was married to Malachi, one of the Essene men. When the Essene left Masada because they were afraid fighting was about to begin, Nahara went with them. She and the rest of the group were killed by Roman soldiers when they discovered the people hiding in a cave near Masada.

Yehuda

Yehuda was Tamar's son. When the Essene people fled Masada because they feared violence was coming Tamar tied her son to a tree so that he would have to stay in the protected fort. Yehuda went to live with Revka. He was among those who escaped the violence when the Romans breached the walls at Masada. He later lived with Yael and Revka at Alexandria until he was a grown man. When he became an adult, he re-entered the Essene sect.



Yonah

Yonah is the daughter of Shirah and Eleazar ben Ya'ir. She was born the night of the massacre at Masada. Her mother forced herself to go into early labor because she wanted her daughter to be born before she was killed so the child's soul would not wander because she had no name preventing God from calling the baby to Him. Yael took the baby with her to the cistern so she would be one of those saved from the Roman invasion. Yonah grew up in Alexandria with Yael and Revka.

Menachem ben Arrat

Menachem ben Arrat is the highest priest in the synagogue at Masada. He was among those who made the agreement that the group of Essenes must be allowed to live at Masada and be left alone. Revka went to this powerful man for help for her grandchildren but he turned her away because he could not be bothered with such a small problem. When Shirah was arrested as a witch it was said that Ben Arrat would not step outside his doorway because he was afraid of her power.

Beree

Beree is the angel of rain. It was to this angel that Shirah told Revka she should pray as part of the ritual to get the voices of her grandsons back. It was believed Shirah did not go to the dovecote the day she was arrested because Beree had come to her in a dream warning her to be prepared. Later, when the Romans were trying to breach the walls of Masada, Shirah called to Beree to send rain believing it would slow the Romans in their work.

Abba

Abba was the elderly leader of the Essene. He was so intent on peace he put his people in danger in the act of trying to avoid any contact with those who participated in war. At one point in the story after the Essene people had moved out of Masada to a cave, they were so hungry they could barely stand. Despite their dire circumstances, the Man from the Valley had to convince Abba to let his people have the food he and Aziza had brought them.

Noah and Levi

Noah and Levi are the sons of Zara and Yaov. They are the grandsons of Revka and lived with her at Masada. The boys lost their voices when they watched their mother being raped, tortured and killed at the hands of Roman soldiers. The boys regained their voices after Shirah gave Revka a charm. The two were among those who survived the massacre at Masada.



Mal'ach ha-Mavet

Mal'ach ha-Mavet was the Jewish name for the angel of death. It was said that because Yael's mother died before she was born, Yael had been touched by this angel. It was also said this angel never lost sight of his victims. Even people who traveled to another city in the belief that they could outrun death would be surprised to find the angel of death waiting for them when they arrived.

Lilith

Lilith is a female demon believed to seduce men and steal the children of the women. Children were often not named for eight days after they were born because it was believed Lilith could not find them and steal their breath if they had no name. After this eight-day period, however, it was believed a child would be strong enough to withstand Lilith.

Arieh

Arieh is the baby born to Yael, the son of Ben Simon. Yael named the baby Arieh, the Jewish word for lion. He was described as a serious, quiet child. Arieh was one of the children that survived the massacre at Masada. He lived with his mother at Alexandria after they left Masada.

King Herod

King Herod, an evil king, had originally built Masada as a retreat for himself nearly one hundred years before the Jews took refuge in the fortress. Although the king had been cruel, killing even his own wife, Yael and the others were grateful he had built the fortress/palace as it gave them a protected place to take refuge from the Romans.

Ashtoreth

Ashtoreth is a goddess who was outlawed by the Jewish temple. Her followers believed she represented the feminine aspects of God. Although Shirah usually kept the doors to the goddess' altar closed, Yael got a glimpse of a figure of this idol in Shirah's home and knew the woman still made sacrifices to that goddess.

Nehimiah and Oren

Nehimiah and Oren were the sons of Sia and Ben Simon. Both these boys died of a fever in the desert.



Symbols and Symbolism

Red Thread

Red thread is a symbol of protection. It is also said to be the color that got the attention of the angels and God. The image of red thread appears several times during the course of the novel. The first mention comes when Yael indicates that her fate was sewn to her feet with red thread. Later, when Yael set her pet goat free, she tied a red thread around its neck for protection. After Yoav's wife was killed, it was indicated he carried his ax around with him as if it were bound to him with invisible red silk. The red thread that Yael used to make the pattern like the one worn by the Man from the North was also said to have protective powers.

Thin Silver Amulet with the Image of Solomon

This silver amulet was ultimately the object that alerted Amram to the fact that it had been Aziza who had been fighting by his side and not her brother Adir. Yael first got this amulet for her brother, Amram, when he decided to work in his father's profession and become an assassin. Amram wore this amulet until he gave it to the warrior whom he believed was Adir when that warrior saved Amram's life. On the night the Romans set fire to the second wall built at Masada and all the people were being killed, Amram snuck up behind Aziza to slit her throat. He realized then to whom it was that he actually owed his life.

A Blue Scarf

This blue scarf was a gift from Amram to Yael when he had to leave Jerusalem for good because he was a wanted man. Later, it was this scarf that helped him locate Yael and their father in the desert because Yael had torn the scarf into squares to mark their trail when they went to look for a cure for Sia and her sons. One of the squares made its way to Amram letting him know that the two of them were alive in the desert. Amram wore a piece of this scarf on his armor as a good luck charm every time he went into battle. A piece of it was also given to his nephew, Arieah. The piece of cloth seemed to soothe the baby.

A Flame Tree

When Yael tried to talk Amram out of becoming an assassin, she talked to him under a flame tree. She hoped he would understand the message she was trying to send and that it would be enforced by the presence of the tree, an omen of death and war.



A Goat

Because the goat that Ben Simon found in the desert preferred to be with Yael instead of going to Sia who should have been its rightful owner, Sia guessed that Yael and Ben Simon were having an affair. Later, when Yael and her father went off with the warriors into the desert to go to Masada, Yael left the goat because she knew the trip through the desert would be too hard on it. As Yael tried to make the goat stay away from her, the goat was symbolic of Sia's spirit because Yael indicated she felt as if she was trying to chase Sia's ghost away from her.

A Lion on a Chain

When the Romans came to set up camp in the valley below Masada they brought with them a lion, the symbol of the ancient tribe of Judah. This lion was chained, a sign to the people taking refuge in Masada of what would happen to them. The night that Yael and Shirah went to poison the Roman soldiers Yael slipped off and freed the lion, a sign back to the Romans that the Jews had powers of which they knew nothing about and would not be made prisoners as easily as they might think.

Small Jar of Hemlock

Revka felt an angel was guiding her when she decided to take along a small jar of hemlock that her husband had used to kill rats in his bakery when she and her family fled from the Valley of Cypresses. During their flight, Revka had a dream that her husband was telling her that each loaf of bread fed a person the way they needed to be fed. When the soldiers who killed her daughter demanded that Revka make them food, she felt an angel guide her again in baking the hemlock into the bread so she could kill the men.

Amulets with the Sun and Moon

Shirah's mother gave her daughter these two gold amulets with the sun and moon on them when she sent Shirah to Jerusalem. She told Shirah the amulets were intended to be given to daughters only. Shirah gave one of these amulets to Yael after Yael gave birth to Arie. Even though Shirah's daughters did not know at the time, Shirah had been Yael's nursemaid and felt as if she were the girl's mother. Yael later gave this amulet to Wynn after she helped him escape from Masada hoping he would have luck in getting back to his homeland. Shirah gave the second amulet also to Yael when she went to put the poisoned honey where the Romans would find it. Yael sold this second amulet to buy fare for herself, Revka and the children from Jerusalem to Alexandria after they survived the massacre at Masada. The amulets were symbols of protection.



Thin Twist of Steel

This thin twist of steel was used by Shirah to form what looked like a key that the Man from the North might have used to open his shackles so that Yael would not be questioned about how he got free. Ironically, this twist of steel was later used to open the cell where the Man from the North was held when Yael and Aziza snuck him out of the gates of Masada. The twist of steel was also used to open the lock on the door to Channa's house when Aziza and Shirah went there to exorcise Channa and get Yael's baby back.

Doves

The doves are important in the novel because it was their droppings that nourished the earth in Masada where the people's food was grown. The birds were also a signal to Yael that it was time for her to take Revka and the children and go to the place where Revka had first known Shirah for who she really was. The doves seemed to be a symbol of life and hope as they appear in several different parts of the novel.

Cloak of Invisibility

This cloak of invisibility appears several different times in the novel and is important in many different scenarios. It is this grey cloak said to have been made out of spiders' webs that allowed the assassin to sneak up on his victims and kill them unseen. Yael and Aziza used this cloak when they snuck the Man from the North out of his cell and to his freedom. Yael took the cloak from her dead father's body when she saw it in the plaza after he was killed.

Arrows for Amram

Because she could not work the loom like other women, Aziza set herself to making arrows she said were for Amram. The red feathers she added to the shaft were in honor of his nickname Hol, or the phoenix. As Aziza thought about her work and tried her hand at shooting her own arrows, she realized she'd really made them for herself with the red feathers reminding her of the lilies that grew near Iron Mountain in the area where she grew up.

A Pomegranate

When Shirah gave Yael a pomegranate, Yael realized it was Shirah who had been her nursemaid when she was a baby. The pomegranate sparked the memory in Yael because Shirah gave this same fruit to Yael when she had to leave her when Yael was still a young child.



White Ibis

Yael indicates that this white ibis has taken possession of the fountain in the garden of the house where she lives in Alexandria. Yael believes the ibis may be the reincarnation of Shirah as it looks at them with compassion and observes them carefully.

The Lion's Collar

After Yael set the lion the Romans had chained in their camp free, she kept the animal's collar and wore it around her arm. After Yael, Revka and the children were found in the cistern by the Roman soldiers, Yael showed this collar to the Romans asking if they knew what it was. The collar represented Yael's act of setting the lion free. It was also a sign to them that Yael had some sort of power that they didn't understand.



Settings

Jerusalem

Jerusalem is the city from which Yael and her father fled after the Romans destroyed the temple and burned the house in which the family had lived. The temple in Jerusalem was considered to be the center of the Jewish faith.

Valley of Thorns

The Valley of Thorns is the place through which Yael and those with her traveled on their way to Masada before they reached the desert.

Masada

Masada was a palace/fortress built by King Herod. The Jewish zealots took over this palace as a stronghold not only because it was well stocked with supplies but also because it was located on a high plateau with only a narrow serpent-like path available to reach the fortress. The Snake Gate is the name of the main gate that allowed entrance to Masada. Much of the action of the novel takes place in Masada.

The Mikvah

The mikvah is a ceremonial bath used by women to cleanse themselves of impurity after their monthly period. During her first trip to the mikvah at Masada, Yael was drawn into the gossip of the other field workers. They asked Yael about her brother, Amram, and swapped rumors about Shirah's daughter Aziza.

Valley of the Cypresses

The Valley of the Cypresses is the place where Revka lived with her husband before their town was attacked by the Romans and her husband was killed.

The Desert

All of the people who traveled to Masada had to pass through a desert to do so. During her trip to Masada, Yael witnessed the deaths of Sia, Ben Simon and their children. It was because of her affair with Ben Simon in the desert that Yael got pregnant.



Iron Mountain

Shirah lived with Sa'adillos, a tribesman from Moab and Nahara's father, on Iron Mountain, while she waited for word from Eleazar ben Ya'ir that she could come to him.

Alexandria

Alexandria is the city in which Shirah had lived with her mother. She was forced to leave this city when it was discovered she was pregnant. After Masada was overcome by the Romans, Revka, Yael and the children returned to Alexandria.

The Nile

The Nile River is the place to which Shirah's mother took her to find out if her daughter's element was truly water as she suspected it was after her daughter went swimming in the fountain at their house.

The Cistern

The cistern is the place where Shirah often went to rejuvenate herself. She and Eleazar ben Ya'ir would meet there for romantic rendezvous. It was at this cistern that Revka first saw Shirah's tattoos and realized what she was. It was to this cistern that Shirah told Yael they should go in order to survive the destruction at Masada.



Themes and Motifs

Women

The novel “The Dovekeeper” tells the story of four fictional women who lived at Masada during a war between the Romans and the Jews. Women’s issues are important in the novel as not only relationships between women are of special interest. Although women were seen as being the weaker sex during this time period, these women prove they were anything but weak.

Relationships of interest between women include the relationships between Yael and Sia; and Shirah and Channa. In each of these relationships one woman — Yael and Shirah — had affairs with the husband of the other woman — Sia and Channa. In each of these cases Yael and Shirah received the forgiveness of the women upon whom they had cheated. Yael desired forgiveness because she was afraid Sia would cause her baby to die while Shirah wanted Channa to realize that what she had done to Shirah and her baby was wrong.

Relationships between mothers and daughters are also important in the novel. Through Revka’s story, the reader learns how fierce the love a mother has for a daughter can be. Even though she was a woman and was considered weak, Revka killed the men who raped and tortured her daughter. In another case, the relationships between Shirah and her daughters also represent the love between a mother and a child. Although both her biological children chose lives that were very different from hers, Shirah learned to love both of them even in their differences. Shirah fought to keep her youngest daughter, Nahara, from joining the Essene sect because she knew it would mean the girl would live a life of subservience. Even though Aziza was not a typical woman and disguised herself to perform as a warrior, Shirah accepted Aziza’s decision and realized it was through her place as a warrior that Aziza had fulfilled her destiny.

The final image presented in the novel is that of Yael and Yonah setting a candle on a lotus leaf free to sail down the Nile River. Both these women were similar in that they lost their mothers on the day of their birth. Even though they never knew the women who brought them into the world, the both realized their mothers were important enough to deserve their honor.

At the period in time in which this account of historical fiction is set, women were looked down upon by the church. Women were said not to be able to hear the voice of God. They were made to sit in the back of the temple so that they would not distract the men during worship. Women also had specific activities in which they were allowed to participate. Women could sew, cook, raise children, and clean house, but were not allowed to even touch weaponry. During their monthly periods women were considered unclean and had to stay away from men. They could only come back into public after they’d purified themselves in a ritual bath.



The Jewish people had even outlawed the idea that there was a feminine aspect of God. For years, women had been trained in keshaphim. These kedeshah were well-educated women whose job was to assist the priests in the temple. It was believed these women could relate to the feminine aspects of God, compassion and knowledge, better than men could. At this point, however the women who were trained in the keshaphim, including Shirah, were referred to as witches and prostitutes. Even though Shirah knew what the people thought of her and her profession, she continued to help the women who came to her.

Religion

It makes sense that religion would be an important theme in this novel as it details events that took place during a religious war. Religion is important not only as the author incorporates into the text the customs and history of the Jewish people but also because she illustrates the differences between religion and true compassion. Although the Jewish leaders stuck closely to the letter of the law, they often missed the idea that followers also needed compassion.

One of the major areas in which the leaders of the Jewish church showed their lack of compassion was when it came to unwed mothers. Shirah, Yael and the slave girl were all victims of the church's lack of compassion. Shirah and her baby were ordered sent out into the wilderness to die when the leaders of the church realized Shirah had a baby but did not appear to be married. Before this, Shirah had lost her job as Yael's nursemaid when Yael's father learned she was pregnant. Similarly the slave girl at Masada lost her job when it was discovered she was pregnant. Because the girl gave birth to a boy, Shirah knew the girl could tell the church leaders she had found the baby and that the family she had once worked for would take it and her in even though they knew it was lie.

The case of Revka's grandsons was another case in which the church leaders failed to show compassion. Revka went to the priest because her grandsons had lost their voices. Her son-in-law wanted to hear their voices again before he would even consider putting his faith in God again. When Revka went to the priest, however, he told her that her problem was too insignificant for him to worry about. His lack of compassion for Revka's problem sent her to seek help from Shirah, a kedeshah, even though the leaders of the church did not look favorably upon these women whom they called witches.

Omens/Fate

The idea that one's life was determined before they were even born as well as the idea that one's fortune could be determined by omens were both important aspects of the lives of Jewish people. They believed there was little they could do to change their fate. They also believed that once an omen was sighted, there was nothing they could do to alter to luck either good or bad, that the omen signified.



The Jews of this time period thought there was little they could do to avoid whatever fate had been laid out for them. "All that will ever be has already been written long before it happens. There is nothing we can do to stop it" (p.2).

This quote from Yael's thoughts as she followed her father through the desert illustrated the people's opinion of their fate. Shirah knew that her fate was to fall in love with her cousin and be ruined by him. She didn't try to fight her fate though she did wonder later if things might have turned out differently if she hadn't gone to Ben Ya'ir when he called for her. She felt, however, that she had no choice.

There are two instances in which it was believed by changing a character's name that character's fate was also changed. The first instance took place when Shirah changed her daughter's name from Rebekah to Aziza. Even though Aziza thought the change in her name had changed her fate, Shirah realized later that even the name change was known by fate as it was the way Aziza fulfilled her destiny. Had she not been so much like a warrior, she would never have been able to comfort the Man from the Valley, who had sworn he would never let any woman in his bed again. He was able to love Aziza because she was so much like a warrior. After the massacre at Masada Yael changed her name, telling the Roman general that her name was Shirah. She believed this changed her fate.

The Jewish people also put great emphasis on omens. Anything they saw could be interpreted as an omen. A good omen indicated they were in God's favor while a bad omen indicated that had fallen out of God's favor. Good omens included the mist the night the warriors were to attack a village. Revka believed that it was a good omen that the door to Channa's home was made of red cypress. Unfortunately bad omens far outweighed the good omens noted in the novel. Bad omens included ravens, the citrus tree with the bitter fruit, the lack of rain at Masada, and the dove's laying of speckled eggs.

The Lion

The lion was a very important symbol in this novel. To the Jewish community, the creature represented the ancient tribe of Judah. To Yael specifically the lion represented Ben Simon. She had seen this lion in her dreams and knew that he was her destiny.

Because the lion was a symbol of the ancient tribe of Judah, the Romans brought a lion with them when they camped in the valley below Masada. This lion was chained, a sign to those taking refuge in Masada that the same future was in store for them. One afternoon when Yael and Shirah went to deliver poisoned honey to the Romans, Yael slipped down to the area where the lion was chained. The warriors at Masada had made a wager among themselves that the man who was able to free the lion would be the one to receive the greatest glory from God. Although she was a woman, Yael was able to remove the lion's collar and set it free. As Shirah watched, she was surprised the lion did not attack Yael. Yael later said she was able to free the lion because she told it her name, giving it possession of her.



All of her life, Yael had dreams of a lion. She'd seen this lion bite her in his dreams. From these images, she somehow knew a lion was in her future. It does not appear that the lion at the Roman's camp was the one that Yael believed she had seen in her dreams. She believed her lion was a man named Ben Simon. This man had a scar on his face where he claimed he'd been bitten by a lion but not killed. It was this man with whom Yael had an affair and became pregnant with Arieah. Ben Simon was the lion who was Yael's great love.

Silence

Silence is important in the novel, especially in respect to Revka's grandsons. Another aspect of silence discussed in the novel comes when characters learned there was a time for silence and a time for speaking. Ultimately, the novel seems to indicate that silence can be a positive character trait.

Because Revka's grandsons were mute, it was assumed by the people at Masada that there was something wrong with them. Revka knew differently but didn't want to tell anyone what had actually happened to the boys. From her grandchildren, Revka has learned that one doesn't necessarily need to use words to communicate. Yael used the example of the scorpion to teach the boys that silence wasn't a bad quality. The scorpion was silent, but was cunning she noted.

Yael was another character who was affected by silence. She learned to use silence as a way to protect herself. Revka, in fact, thought it was because of Yael's silence that the doves would come to Yael and light on her. She believed the birds found the silence comforting. When Yael went through the actions that Shirah had described to her to seek Sia's forgiveness and save her baby, Yael soon realized the task was not one she could do in silence. She had to come out from behind her veil of silence and speak her regrets out loud in order to receive the forgiveness she needed. Similarly, when Revka went to Shirah for help with her grandsons, Revka realized she would have to tell Shirah what had happened to them in the desert. She was not able to be silent about it if she wanted help.

A final positive point about silence made in the book indicates the quality of silence might be closer to the spirit of God than speech. It is pointed out several times in the novel that God brought the world into being by speech. While speech is important, Revka wondered if silence might not actually be a way in which a person could come closer to the spirit of God. She believed that prayers offered up in silence were not more powerful than those containing thousands of spoken words.

Styles

Point of View

This novel is told from the first person point of view of four different women. The first part of the novel is told from the first person point of view of Yael; the second part, Revka; the third part, Aziza; and the fourth part, Shirah. The concluding section of the book “Alexandria” returns to the first person point of view of Yael. Use of the first person point of view seems appropriate in this story as it allows the reader to really focus in on the women being featured in each section of the novel. If the story had been told only from the point of view of one of these characters the reader would not get a full picture of the different types of women who came to Masada, the reasons they came there and the experiences they had. The majority of the story is told through exposition as the women describe the conditions they face in their lives, the people they meet and the situations they face. There is only scattered dialogue.

Language and Meaning

Significant in this novel are the images that appear over and over again, in a way binding the novel together even though the story is told by several different women. One of the most significant of the images is that of the lion. Lions and lionesses are mentioned more than 100 times during the course of the novel. The lion symbolizes both the ancient tribe of Judah to the general population while it symbolizes Ben Simon to Yael specifically. Another creature that is referred to repeatedly in the novel is the scorpion. These creatures first appear in the hallway where Yael was forced to sleep as a baby. Yael later used the creatures as an example to teach Revka’s grandchildren that silence was sometimes a gift. At the conclusion of the novel, Yael compared the story she would tell the Romans about the last night at Masada to the painful sting that a scorpion could deliver.

Also significant in the novel is the references to Jewish holidays. Even while the people are traveling through the desert and living at Masada, they still try to keep up with and observe the Jewish holy days. The author doesn’t leave her reader hanging when she refers to these holy days. She allows the characters to describe the reason for each of the celebrations and often describes how to people were to celebrate. The author also give the history of the temple in Jerusalem and its importance to the people as well as the history of Masada and the man who had built it. Several Jewish words are used in the novel but the meanings of these words are included in the text. The times of the year in which the different parts of story are set are referred to using the Jewish names for the months. Those months, even when the reader is given a description of the weather during the particular time of year, don’t match up in any way with the Roman calendar.

Structure

This book is divided into four large parts with a concluding section named “Alexandria.” A different character narrates each one of the parts of the novel. The parts have no chapter divisions and are quite long with 150 pages in Part 1; 140 pages in Part 2; 139 pages in Part 3 and 92 Pages in Part 4. The final section “Alexandria” is the shortest at 39 pages. The majority of the novel is told in the past tense. The exception is the final section. It is told in the present tense.

Although the action of the novel moves more or less on a linear timeline, there are times in which the narrator jumps forward or backward in the story. Most of these moves backward in time take place at the beginning of a new part of the novel. For instance, Yael’s story begins with her birth and continues through the birth of her son at Masada. When her part of the novel ends, it is roughly the summer of 70 C.E. In the next part of the novel, the narrator goes back in time to pick up the story of Revka, a woman who arrived at Masada before Yael did. When Revka’s story ends, it is roughly the summer of 71 C.E. Revka’s story is unusual in the way that it moves back and forth between Revka’s experiences at Masada and those she had while fleeing from her former home in the Valley of Cypresses. Shirah’s story is also told in this manner in which flashbacks of the beginnings of her relationship with Ben Ya’ir and her job of being Yael’s nursemaid are interspersed with descriptions of what was happening at Masada as the Romans prepared to attack the fortification.



Quotes

Everywhere I walked my fate walked with me, sewn to my feet with red thread. All that will ever be has already been written long before it happens. There is nothing we can do to stop it.”

-- Narrator (Yael) (Part 1 paragraph 2)

Importance: In this quote, Yael thought about how her life and the direction it would take had already been determined before she was ever born. She believed there was nothing that a person could do to change the outcome that fate had laid out for him.

He was part of a secret group, men who carried the curled dagger of the Sicarii, Zealots who hid sharp knives in their cloaks which they used to punish those who refused to fight Rome, especially the priests who accepted the legion's sacrifices and their favor at the Temple.”

-- Narrator (Yael) (Part 1 paragraph 2)

Importance: Yael's father, Yosef bar Elhanan, was an assassin who worked as part of a group of religious Zealots known as the Sicarii who were against the Romans. Because of his occupation, Yael knew no man would be interested in marrying her.

On the Day of Atonement I found myself guilt-ridden, appalled to think God knew what I did at night, aware that I had stolen something that didn't belong to me, as though I were a common thief, as well as the murderess my father had claimed me to be.”

-- Narrator (Yael) (Part 1 paragraph 1)

Importance: Even though she refused to ask for forgiveness of her sins, Yael was terrified because she knew that God knew what she had done in her life. She had taken on herself not only the sin of adultery, of which she knew she was guilty, but also the sin of murder, because her father blamed her for the death of her mother.

I knew nothing of my father's life before he'd taken up the dagger, though I had heard rumors that he'd had a brother who'd been sold into slavery. If a man sees his brother tied with ropes and dragged down the cobblestone road, does he ever see anything else? If ten men are kept in a room with a lion and only one survives, what does that man become? If a woman with red hair keeps silent, will she ever be able to speak the truth again?”

-- Narrator (Yael) (Part 1 paragraph 2)

Importance: Yael wondered in this quote if the experiences she, her father and Ben Simon had affected the type of people they became.

The young warriors shouted that Hol had sent them. They knew the phoenix, the warrior who managed to rise each time another would have fallen. At the mention of the pet name known only to my brother's closest friends, my father dropped his weapon.”

-- Narrator (Yael) (Part 1 paragraph 1)



Importance: When the warriors that Yael and her father saw in the desert called Amram by his nickname “Hol,” they knew that the men had indeed been sent by Amram and were no longer suspicious of them.

I gazed up to see that a dove had lit on the wall. I was quiet and held out my hands. After all I'd done and all my sins, it came to me, unafraid.”
-- Narrator (Yael) (Part 1 paragraph 1)

Importance: Yael was surprised that the dove, the bird who was able to fly so close to God, came to her even as sinful as she was. Shirah also saw the dove willingly light on Yael's hands and knew she wanted her help in the dovecotes.

I wanted to speak of the night when I cut myself for the twenty-first time, and the morning when I left to set out in search of a cure, and the evening when I returned to find that Ben Simon had already entered the World-to-Come. Perhaps that in itself was witchery, to make someone yearn to reveal herself.”
-- Narrator (Yael) (Part 1 paragraph 2)

Importance: Even though Yael wanted to hide her sins from most people, when she met Shirah, she felt like she wanted to share with this woman what she had done and all the sins she had committed.

If that's how you feel, then you'll have to accept that the one you stole from will take your child.”
-- Shirah (Part 1 paragraph 11)

Importance: Shirah warned Yael that if she wasn't able to feel regret and ask forgiveness for stealing Sia's husband and getting pregnant with Ben Simon's baby, Sia would have the power to take Yael's baby.

Neither Revka nor I said more. She had let slip that she was aware of my condition, and I was now mindful that her grandsons had lost their voices under circumstances she didn't wish to speak of. I did not venture to ask if demons had been at work, as some people suggested. In return, she did not question me further.”
-- Narrator (Yael) (Part 1 paragraph 1)

Importance: “Neither Revka nor I said more. She had let slip that she was aware of my condition, and I was now mindful that her grandsons had lost their voices under circumstances she didn't wish to speak of. I did not venture to ask if demons had been at work, as some people suggested. In return, she did not question me further.”

I am convinced there was an angel standing beside me, whispering Take this, not that. / At the last moment I reached for the small jar of the hemlock my husband used on vermin. / Perhaps the angel had given me what I needed most of all.
-- Narrator (Revka) (Part 2 paragraph 3)



Importance: Revka believed that as she packed to leave the home she'd built with her husband that there was an angel guiding her, telling her the items she would later need. These items included the hemlock that her husband used to poison rats.

Now we had ignored the most holy of days, and in doing so we had turned our backs on our God. The boys were dancing in the sand, covered with feathers, clucking to each other like birds. It was the sort of mistake that calls demons from their hiding places.
-- Narrator (Revka) (Part 2 paragraph 2)

Importance: Revka and Yoav believed that it was because of their actions on the day of Yom Kippur that they called upon themselves the attack by the Roman soldiers.

To my shame I didn't see what my grandsons saw, I only understood when I saw the broken shell Zara had become.
-- Narrator (Revka) (Part 2 paragraph 4)

Importance: Revka's grandsons saw what the soldiers did to their mother through the waterfall. The experience made them lose their voices. Revka, however, was unconscious during her daughter's attack. She could only guess from the injuries her daughter had received what the men had done to her and what her grandsons had seen.

My premonition that Yoav would run into the wilderness and forsake us in his grief had been correct, only not in the manner I had envisioned.
-- Narrator (Revka) (Part 2 paragraph 2)

Importance: Even though Yoav did not physically abandon his mother-in-law and sons after the death of Zara, he abandoned them emotionally by retreating into himself and his desire for vengeance.

That shouldn't include sharing one's mother,' she remarked in a hurt tone, so that anyone might think she'd been the one who had been cast away when she alone had made her choice on the day of the salt rain.
-- Nahara (Revka) (Part 2 paragraph 3)

Importance: After Nahara saw her mother give Yael an amulet meant for one of her daughters, Nahara seemed hurt even though she had chosen to join the Essene, a group that wouldn't let her wear the amulet. Even though Revka pointed out to Nahara that she wouldn't have taken the amulet if it was offered to her Nahara indicated she shouldn't have to share her mother.

The assassin kept his head bowed as he waited for Yael's decision, a sign of respect he had never offered to his daughter in the past.
-- Narrator (Revka) (Part 2 paragraph 10)

Importance: Amram begged their father to come to the synagogue the day of Arie's circumcision. Yael was hesitant about letting their father use the knife on the baby. As



Amram convinced Yael to trust her father, the man bowed his head waiting in respect for her decision. In the past, the man had always treated Yael like a dog.

I was not a baker's wife or a grandmother or a woman who cared for doves, feeding the ailing birds spoonfuls of barley water, tending to them through the night. I was a murderess.

-- Narrator (Revka) (Part 2 paragraph 1)

Importance: After Revka saw Shirah making love to a man in the cistern, she felt she needed to share her past with Shirah. Even though Shirah and the others at Masada knew some things about Revka, they did not know she had killed the men who had murdered her daughter.

Should I judge myself?' she ventured to ask. 'Or should I leave that to the Almighty, who forgives us all for being what He made us?'"

-- Shirah (Part 2 paragraph 9)

Importance: Shirah tried to convince Revka they all had things in their pasts of which the church might not approve. Instead of judging their own fallings, Shirah told Revka they should leave judgment to God.

I told myself she was listening to me, but in truth, she hadn't heard a word.

-- Narrator (Revka) (Part 2 paragraph 2)

Importance: Even though Revka repeatedly told Channa that Arie had a family that cared for him, she later realized that the lonely, barren, bitter woman was paying no attention to her.

The mark beneath my eye is made of fire. It's the single element that can overwhelm iron.

-- Narrator (Aziza) (Part 3 paragraph 2)

Importance: Aziza explained how she came to have the scar below her left eye. She threw a note her father had written to her mother into the fire but the paper had flown back to burn her face. This indicates that Aziza's weakness was her father and the fact that she didn't know who he was. Aziza reasoned that the injury was understandable as fire was the only element able to overcome iron.

And yet, as I watched them at their studies, I thought how much easier it would be if only I could do as my mother asked, if I could be the one to sit beside her, if it had not already been written that I was bound to disobey.

-- Narrator (Aziza) (Part 3 paragraph 1)

Importance: Even though Aziza wanted to be the daughter her mother desired, she believed it was her fate to be disobedient.



We were now the only fortress of rebels in Judea. All others had been conquered, and because we alone stood fast, Rome had become more interested in us.

-- Narrator (Aziza) (Part 3 paragraph 1)

Importance: The threat that the Romans would try to attack the settlement at Masada had become more great since that fortress was the only one still standing.

In that moment I knew he was the man for whom my mother had made such sacrifices, the reason she had been cast out of Jerusalem, why she had waited on the Iron Mountain day after day, until the dove returned with the message to come to him at last.”

-- Narrator (Aziza) (Part 3 paragraph 5)

Importance: When Aziza went to get Yael’s baby from Channa, Ben Ya’ir touched her forehead as if she were his daughter. It was at this point that she realized that he indeed was her father.

The warriors believed that Adir had been the archer at the contest and had therefore taken him on as their brother.

-- Narrator (Aziza) (Part 3 paragraph 6)

Importance: Aziza participated in the archery contest because she wanted her father to see her abilities and say something good about her even though he might not know who it was he was encouraging. While she did win the respect of the warriors, Aziza’s desire for recognition backfired because the men believed it was Adir who was the master archer. For this reason, he was sent off to battle sooner.

If there were children of darkness and children of light, and if there raged a constant battle between the two, then they had drawn a line between us, even though their foremothers, Rachel and Sarah and Rebecca and Leah, were ours as well, even though we prayed to the same God, He who had no equal. We could not claim the same world.”

-- Narrator (Aziza) (Part 3 paragraph 3)

Importance: This quote comes after the Essene left Masada because they believed God did not want them around the people there if they were preparing for war. The quote addresses the age old quandry between those of different religious beliefs. Even though they believed in the same God, the religious Zealots and the Essene could not come to agreement on the foundation of God’s desires for them. In this case, the Essene believed they were breaking God’s laws just being around a group that owned weaponry. The Jews at Masada, however, believed God wanted them to fight for their religious freedom.

Channa is not like the other woman who wanted your child,’ my mother warned. ‘That woman had a heart, though she was dust. This one has none. Believe me, she would see your child murdered before she returned him to you. And she’ll put a curse on mine. Remember that when I come for what I want.”

-- Shirah (Part 3 paragraph 2)



Importance: Shirah warned Yael how careful they must be when they went to Channa to get Arieh back. She emphasized that not only Arieh was in danger but Shirah's unborn baby was also in danger. True to Shirah's word, Channa put a knife to Arieh's throat during the exorcism that Shirah conducted on her. Shirah knew about Channa's personality because Channa had sent Shirah and Aziza into the wilderness to die because Shirah had slept with Ben Ya'ir.

Theirs were the screams of women, and yet there was worse still. Beneath those screams, I heard the cries of children. When I spied Amram, he became a part of the dream, changing before me into a demon, his face a demon's face, his deeds a demon's doings."

-- Narrator (Aziza) (Part 3 paragraph 1)

Importance: Aziza was shocked when she saw the man to whom she had pledged herself killing innocent women and children.

He'd known what his commander wanted of him, yet he'd done God's bidding instead. / Of all who were before me, he was the only one I wished to stand beside."

-- Narrator (Aziza) (Part 3 paragraph 1)

Importance: Because the Man from the Valley did not participate in the killing of women and children he won Aziza's respect.

I would never have imagined that she who had once been my rival had become a sister to me. If anything, I had imagined she might become my sister through the laws of marriage."

-- Narrator (Aziza) (Part 3 paragraph 2)

Importance: Aziza had thought the only relationship she might have with Yael would be through the bonds of marriage. Even though she became disheartened by Amram's inability to see her for who she was, Aziza was surprised that her relationship with Yael, who had once been her rival because Yael had been able to please Aziza's mother when Aziza couldn't, became deeper.

She had renounced the girl I had brought to life, and because of this we were no longer bound to each other. Yet I would think of her not as a woman huddled in a cave, eyes downcast, waiting for the End of Days, but as the only birth I had ever witnessed, God's great glory and miracle."

-- Narrator (Aziza) (Part 3 paragraph 3)

Importance: Since Nahara no longer recognized she was the person she was born as, Aziza felt this meant that she was no longer bound to protect her sister and try to save her from herself. Even though Aziza believed Nahara had made bad decisions for her life, she still remembered her sister, and her sister's birth, as being the only miracle she'd ever seen.



Dust was rising as the Roman Legion approached. There was a column from the north and another from the east. When the troops joined together, the rising clouds formed not the shape of the boar, the symbol they carried on their banners, but the figure of a lion, the symbol of the ancient tribe of Judah and of the wilderness around us.”

-- Narrator (Aziza) (Part 3 paragraph 1)

Importance: Ironically, the dust from the Roman soldiers seemed to form the shape of a lion, a representation of the ancient tribe of Judah. The lion is an important symbol in the novel not only because it represented the tribe of Judah but also because it represented Yael’s relationship with Ben Simon. The lion ultimately became a symbol of the Jewish people’s choice to free themselves by sacrificing themselves instead of allowing the Romans to kill or enslave them.

There was only one reason why Rome should come to try to defeat us when we were so few and their empire so great. They feared we rebels might serve as an ember to reignite the flame of freedom.”

-- Narrator (Shirah) (Part 4 paragraph 3)

Importance: There was only one reason that the Romans were determined to overthrow the fortification at Masada. This was because they did not want to take the chance that any rebels would be left alive to reignite the Zealot movement.

It had no choice, for it had been written that my cousin and I would find each other, and that our love would ruin me, and that I would not care.

-- Narrator (Shirah) (Part 4 paragraph 2)

Importance: Shirah believed that she had no choice to take any path other than the one laid out by her destiny. Many characters in the novel felt they had no way to change the paths their lives would take because their destiny ruled their lives.

Before I gave birth to my first daughter and was cast out of Jerusalem, before I was taken to the Iron Mountain by a man I never called by name, before Nahara entered this world, before I had a son who was named Adir, a name his father allowed me, for it means noble to my people, before the doves brought me here, Yael was my daughter, though she was not born to me, and I was her immah, her beloved mother, though I was little more than a girl myself.”

-- Narrator (Shirah) (Part 4 paragraph 2)

Importance: The reader realizes with this quote that it was Shirah who served as Yael’s nursemaid when Yael was only a baby. This information helps the reader to understand why Shirah was attracted to Yael and wanted her to work in the dovecote with her when she first saw her enter Masada. It also helps the reader understand why Shirah felt comfortable giving Yael the amulet that was meant for a daughter. It was because she considered Yael her first daughter.

I should have brought you into our home,’ she went on. ‘Then your children would be mine as my husband was yours. We might have carried our burdens and joys together,



as sisters.”

-- Channa (Part 4 paragraph 9)

Importance: Channa realized too late that if she had taken Shirah and Ben Ya’ir’s baby into her house, she could have had the children she always wanted while Shirah and the baby would never have been in danger. It was an accepted practice in that time for a man to take a second wife if his first wife could not have children. Because Channa did not allow Shirah to come into their house, she lost her husband to Shirah.

I knew then I had witnessed a miracle. I waited where I was, praying, offering gratitude to the Almighty, my faith renewed, while on the valley floor the bravest warrior among us made her way back to our mountain, invisible to all men beneath her gray cloak, but radiant in the darkness, a shining star before the eyes of God.”

-- Narrator (Shirah) (Part 4 paragraph 2)

Importance: When Shirah watched Yael walk to the chained lion and release it without being mauled, Shirah realized she had seen a miracle. The men had a wager that the warrior who was able to free the lion would be deemed the greatest warrior of them all. It was ironic that this great warrior turned out not to be one of the men, but a woman.

Yet in that single embrace I saw what I had never seen between my daughter and Amram. I saw that love had led her not to ruin but to her own destiny. I could never have hoped to stop the path she was meant to be on. The Man from the Valley had vowed not to love a woman, but he had never sworn such an oath about another warrior. In becoming a boy, Aziza had allowed him to love her.

-- Narrator (Shirah) (Part 4 paragraph 2)

Importance: Shirah realized when she saw Aziza and the Man from the Valley embrace, that Aziza would never have been able to be a comfort to him if she had not had her experience as a boy. Shirah had always told the girl that love would be her downfall. She realized when she saw Aziza and the hurting man that Aziza was fulfilling her destiny through love.

If we were all to be slaughtered, and if I was to be among the dead, I wanted to make certain this child came forth before she entered the World-to-Come. That was the only way I could ensure she carried a name, which would allow God to call her to Him, unlike the unborn, unnamed souls who must wander without direction for the rest of time.

-- Narrator (Shirah) (Part 4 paragraph 4)

Importance: Even though it wasn’t yet time for her baby to be born, Shirah decided to have the baby early so that she could give her a name. It was believed that babies who died in their mother’s wombs as well as those who hadn’t been named yet couldn’t be called to God.

We had the privilege to be the last stronghold, and as God has favored us so, let us return the favor and die nobly as free men.”

-- Ben Ya’ir (Part 4 paragraph 3)



Importance: The leader of Masada told his people that because God had allowed them to be the last stronghold, they should honor Him by dying as free men and not allowing the Romans to capture or enslave them.

But the warrior stood over Amram and watched him in his throes, offering no solace and no assistance. The man who had been Revka's son-in-law when his name was Yoav, when he still had compassion and faith, let my daughter's murderer die in anguish."
-- Narrator (Shirah) (Part 4 paragraph 3)

Importance: Because of the way that Amram killed Aziza and the way that Amram never realized who Aziza really was, the Man from the Valley did not slit Amram's throat after he was injured by Aziza's dog but instead let him die of his wounds. Yoav's act of letting Amram die naturally was done to show how dishonorable Amram had become. Yoav further showed Amram's dishonor by cutting his armor off him after he was dead.

When he rose, I saw that he had been marked with the letters of the Almighty's name across his chest and arms, for he was the last of the ten, the one who must slay all of the death-givers and then bring upon his own death."
-- Narrator (Yael) (Alexandria paragraph 3)

Importance: Yael saw the markings on the Man from the Valley, and knew that he had been the one chosen to kill the other nine assassins and then kill himself after all the people in Masada were dead.

Neshamah, the breath of her daughter's soul, was returned to her, to keep for all eternity and to take with us, wherever we might go."
-- Narrator (Yael) (Alexandria paragraph 5)

Importance: As Revka had given her son-in-law the last breath of his wife just after Zara died, Yoav returned this breath to her before he killed himself the final night at Masada. In this way, Revka had the spirit of her daughter with her all the time.

Nine hundred, burned, slaughtered. Worst were the children and the women and the babies in their mothers' embrace, their pale, young bodies in clutches of blood, bees circling round as if their remains were sweetened by the honey of their youth. Such deaths were a disgrace to the legion, and the soldiers took no joy in this surrender."
-- Narrator (Yael) (Alexandria paragraph 1)

Importance: As Yael looked at the bodies of the people who had lived with her at Masada, she thought how their decision to kill themselves rather than surrender had defeated the Romans. Even though the Roman forces had taken Masada, they were not able to take the Jews' lives or their possessions as they had destroyed everything the Romans would have been interested in. Overtaking a fortress in this manner was disgraceful to the Legion. They did not rejoice in their victory, but wondered what had happened to all the people.



Eleazar ben Ya'ir was my kinsman, I announced. I knew him as no other, for I am his cousin. I am Shirah, his closest companion. I alone can tell you the story of this fortress. / In that instant when I changed my name, I changed my fate.”

-- Yael (Alexandria paragraph 1)

Importance: Yael believed that by telling the Roman general that she was Shirah, Ben Ya'ir's companion, that she saved her own life and the lives of those with her. Because she claimed to know Ben Ya'ir intimately, she gave credibility to the story she would tell.

I would give him the story he wanted, but like the scorpion who is hidden in a corner, my story would sting.”

-- Narrator (Yael) (Alexandria paragraph 1)

Importance: Yael knew Flavius Silva wanted the story of what happened at Masada. She also knew he would not be happy when learned the Jews preferred to kill themselves than to be captured or killed by the Romans. Yael compared the story she would tell to a scorpion, a creature that appears often in the novel. The story Yael told would sting the Romans, just as the scorpion might.