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## ***On the Way Down the Masada Snake Path***

### ***Eliezer Shore***

I stopped and shook the pebbles out of my shoe for the third time. "This was a big mistake," I thought. "How could we be so stupid?"

I glanced up at the trail behind us. Sitting atop the mountain was the Masada fortress, all pale and austere in the noonday sun. The light blinded my eyes, and I had to look away.

I turned to face our destination – the visitor's center at the bottom of the mountain, where we had parked our car. How much longer! We were all so hot and thirsty; how were we ever going to make it?

What had started out as an exciting *chol hamoed* adventure was quickly becoming a life-threatening situation. We had awoken early that day – one of the intermediate days of Sukkot – and had driven down toward the Dead Sea. There was me, my husband, our four kids – ages four to nine – and my brother-in-law. Our plan was to take the cable car to the top of Masada, and then walk back down the mountain along the steep and windy trail known as the Snake Path. We had heard that it was a hard path, but doable.

The ride up the mountain was an adventure in itself, with my kids screaming, every time the cable car shook or swayed in the breeze. We spent a couple of hours walking around the fortress, touring the museum, and marveling at the magnificent view of the Judean Desert. A little past mid-day, we headed down the trail, snacks and water bottles in hand.

But we had sorely miscalculated. The day was much hotter than we expected, even for mid-autumn – it must have been 90 degrees. Parts of the trail were extremely steep and hard to navigate, and we had to support our children from falling. The baby carriage, carrying our four-year-old, was especially difficult to navigate down the rocky steps and slope. It was a four-mile walk, which the average hiker could do in about forty-five minutes. We had been at it for almost an hour and were still far from the bottom.

Worse of all, our snacks and water ran out almost immediately. We were all suffering from the heat. My kids were starting to cry, and I was seriously concerned that they would suffer from dehydration.

My husband and I looked at each other in consternation. "Let's just keep going." There was nothing much else to say. I felt that my knees would give out at any moment. I said a silent prayer for help.

For a reason that I don't remember, I broke away from the group, and walked up ahead. I was thus quite surprised to come across a man sitting alone on a stone bench, out in the open sun. What was he doing there? Going up? Going down?

He was a heavy-set man, in his mid-forties, with a swarthy face and dark hair. He needed a shave. He wore a khaki vest, like a security guard, and I noticed a gun in a holster on his belt. There was a black knapsack on the ground beside him. Oddest of all – he was jabbing a scissor in his ear!

He spoke up when he saw me. “Hey, could you please come and help me?”

I froze. I didn't need this. We just wanted to get to the bottom. I looked around to see if there was any way to circumvent him, but the path was narrow and delineated. I remembered hearing about a 20-year-old college student who had recently fallen to her death, after straying from the marked path.

“I have something in my ear, and I need help getting it out,” the man said, in a beseeching tone. That explained his use of the scissors.

I approached him in trepidation. I bent over and looked in his ear. A small stick seemed to be lodged deep inside.

“I was scratching my ear, when the stick broke and left the end inside,” he explained.

I nodded in sympathy, mildly repulsed.

“Let me try those scissors,” I said.

I tried pinching the end of the stick with them but couldn't get hold of it. By now, my family had caught up and were all standing around, watching.

I put my fingers in his ear and tried pinching the stick with my nails, but it was too deep inside. The man smelled of sweat. His hair was greasy and damp, and his clothing needed a wash. Disgusting.

My husband came over to help me. He took hold of the man's earlobe and pulled it down and away, while I extended both pinky fingers and tried to grab the stick with my nails.

Finally, I got a hold of the end and started pulling it out. “I hope he doesn't explode,” I thought humorously to myself.

It was a thin bamboo stick, like a kebab skewer. I pulled a little more, and a little more, and a little more... it was *four inches long!* I thought of Mary Poppins pulling a hat rack out of her carpet bag. How did he get this in his ear? Was he trying to scratch his brain? I dropped it to the ground in disgust.

The man let out a huge sigh, as though I had saved his life – “Oh, my G-d” – and my whole family cheered and applauded. I think I was the only one who realized how bizarre the situation truly was. (Secretly, I was also proud of myself. Both my husband and his brother are doctors, and it was nice to show off my own healing skills, as well.)

The man picked up his knapsack and reached inside. I became tense again. “What’s he up to now?” I thought.

With a flourish, he pulled out a large plastic bottle full of ice water – right in the middle of the Snake Path, in 95-degree heat!

“Thanks so much for helping me,” he said. “Would you guys like a drink?”

We all melted at the sight. “Oh yes! Thank you!” we cried in unison. We passed the bottle back and forth, drinking until we were revived and ready to continue. I felt like I had passed a test – I had helped him, and he had saved us.

We thanked each other again and wished each other a happy holiday. Then my family turned to continue down the mountain. The strange man remained sitting on the bench, as though he had no place better to go.

I had not walked five feet, when I turned around to have a final look in his direction. But he was gone. Vanished like a mirage. The bench was empty, the trail was empty, and as far as I could see, the entire side of the mountain was empty. I couldn’t discern a single place where he might have hidden. He simply disappeared into thin air.

“He wasn’t a person,” I announced to my family. “He was an angel!” We all stared in amazement.

About forty minutes later, we were back in our car, air conditioner blasting, music blaring, heading back to Jerusalem. That was about fifteen years ago. But even today, I think about our trip to the desert fortress, and the impression the whole trip made on me. It always makes me think of another Fortress, to whom I still raise my eyes: “I will say to Hashem, ‘You are my refuge and my fortress, my G-D, in whom I trust’” (Psalms 91:2).

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*Source:* **Rabbi Dr. Eliezer Shore** currently lives in Jerusalem, where he is a published writer and author, storyteller, and Torah teacher. The above story, which he was told by Rachel Berger, appears in his newest book, *Meeting Elijah*, available from Amazon. To receive more of his stories through email, please go to: [elijahstories . subscribemenow.com](mailto:elijahstories.subscribemenow.com).

*Connection:* Just like in the Weekly Reading of *Chukat* (this past week in Israel; this week outside of Israel) – “The people did not have any water.” (Num. 20:2)