

Chapter Twenty

Thursday was a long day. There were many more visitors, including some of my friends and colleagues, members of the media and government officials. The Governor of New York and the Vice President also came by for a short while. Their visits were televised.

We closed the doors at seven o'clock. We'd had enough. It was time to go home. I told Rabbi Gutmacher that we'd be leaving in the morning. He very graciously did not press me to stay for the entire seven-day Shivah period. He just asked if he could come back after dinner to speak with me privately, and of course, I said yes.

He arrived at nine o'clock. June had already retired, and we were completely alone. He took a sip of the coffee and wiped his lips. He looked serious, and I wondered what was on his mind. Was there a new issue?

The rabbi took off his hat and jacket and took a deep breath.

"Mr. Taylor, all of us in Crown Heights and in Chabad Houses all over the world are grateful to you for agreeing to observe the Shivah among us. This tragedy did not strike just your family. It struck all of us in the greater Chabad family and Jewish people everywhere."

"And Christians and Muslim as well."

"Absolutely. And secular people of good will. What you've done kept David's story in the news for a week, when it could easily have been forgotten when the next atrocity occurred. I don't know if you heard about it, but there was a shooting in Alabama two days ago."

"I did not. Was it related to the American Identity Party?"

"Probably not. Some maniac with an assault weapon shot up a supermarket. Killed a few people before the security guard shot him. Something like that happens all the time. And if it's not violence, then it's

something else. A plane crash. An abuse scandal. Tweets from the President. A messy breakup in Hollywood. There's always something to distract the public's attention. But David's story is still on top of the news. And it's all because of you."

"Well, I see what you're saying," I said. "But what happens now? How do we hold the public's attention? How do we prevent the outrage from subsiding? How do we keep David's memory alive?"

"That's what I want to discuss with you."

Here it comes, I thought. He was about to ask me to donate a synagogue or a school building in David's memory. They'd put his name on the building, and his memory would be preserved. I did not want to do that. It would cheapen the tragedy, as if posting his name on a building would be a kind of happy ending. I understood that Chabad needed money, but this was not the time to bring it up. Yet what could I say? He had been David's teacher, and he had orchestrated the entire week. How could I turn him down without at least a nice contribution? It would be ungrateful.

I braced myself. "I'm listening."

"The story will inevitably fall out of the news," he said. "The hearing in Congress and the FBI investigations will drag on. Every once in a while, they'll pop into the news for a day or two, and then they'll fade out again. What do we want to accomplish by keeping the story in the news?"

"We want action. We want to bring down these monsters. We want to save the republic."

"I agree. We can't wait for the ponderous government to take action. We must do it ourselves, and we must do it now. We must strike a mortal blow at them. We must cripple their movement."

Clearly, he was not angling for a contribution to Chabad in David's memory. At least, it didn't seem like it.

"Do you have any ideas?" I asked.

"Perhaps. One idea is to bring a civil suit against them."

"Our family has already discussed it in Margaret's house on

Wednesday, and we decided to do it.”

“Excellent. You must sue for as much as you can get, but even if you’re rewarded billions, it will not be a mortal blow.”

“Why not?”

“Well, first of all, the lawsuit is bound to drag on for years. They’ll resort to all kinds of ploys to delay the trial until the public outrage dies down. Even if you win and are rewarded megabucks, there’ll be appeal after appeal after appeal. After all the appeals are exhausted, even if they actually have to reach into their pockets and pay, what will you have accomplished? That they’ll have to scramble to pay the judgment? That is not an existential threat. It’s just a major nuisance. There are enough sympathizers and fellow-travelers to keep them afloat.”

“Are you saying we shouldn’t sue?”

“No, by all means, sue for everything they’re worth. But you must understand the limitations of a civil lawsuit for damages.”

“I understand. Nonetheless, it’s the best option I have, other than getting a gun and shooting the whole lot of them.”

“Maybe not,” said the rabbi. “Maybe not.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think you may be able to really damage them.”

“How so?”

He pulled a newspaper clipping from his pocket and handed it to me.

“This is from the *New York Times* in the metropolitan section. Read it, then we’ll talk.”

I put on my reading glasses and began to read. It was a small article about Lavender Williams, an African American schoolteacher in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, who had been fired from her job after using the Bible as a historical resource in her sixth-grade history class. She was apparently a well-educated woman. She filed a complaint with the Board of Education. They turned down her petition, because it violated the separation of church and state. That was basically it.

I took off my glasses. “I don’t understand. What does the firing of a religious fanatic have to do with us?”

“Why do you think she’s a religious fanatic?”

“Because the Bible is not history.”

“Do you believe the Bible is true or do you think it’s a myth, as Sanford Johns claims?”

“It’s not only Sanford Johns,” I said. “That’s the universally accepted opinion in academia. I know that Chabad thinks it’s true. Every word of it. And it seems that Lavender Williams is a good Christian and agrees. But that’s a matter of faith. It doesn’t belong in the classroom. That’s teaching religion in a public school. It’s unconstitutional. It violates the establishment clause.”

“I don’t think she was teaching religion. She was teaching historical information that’s derived from the Bible.”

“Look, even if the Bible is true. Even if God split the Red Sea for the Israelites and drowned their Egyptian pursuers, the Bible is not a valid historical record.”

“Are the ancient steles in Egypt and Mesopotamia historical records?”

“Steles are large slabs of stone with engraved inscriptions. We can date them with reasonable accuracy to the times they describe. So we accept their information as history. If we didn’t know when the steles were erected, we could consider them fiction.”

“But now you consider them historical?”

“Yes.”

“Is everything they report historical?”

“Not necessarily,” I said. “There’s usually a strong supernatural element. Victories are achieved because the gods came down and hurled lightning bolts at the enemy. Things like that. But the underlying story is fairly reliable. They didn’t erect steles with fictional tales for the people of their times. You don’t boast about a victory over your enemy if the enemy is occupying your cities.”

“I agree. But why can’t you give the same respect to the Bible? Why can’t you accept the Biblical stories as reliable even if you discount the supernatural elements? In fact, that is what the teacher was clearly doing, using the Bible as a resource for the underlying history and omitting the supernatural element. I don’t think she told them that God spoke to Moses.”

“My dear rabbi, if the Bible was inscribed on a stele that we can date back to the general vicinity of the period it describes, I would agree with you. But we have no biblical stele, just the printed Bible. The oldest copy of the Bible extant is no more than a few hundred years old. Who knows when it was originally written?”

“You know, there are conflicting theories about the reliability of the Old Testament. Some scholars believe it’s very ancient, based on the language and the culture it describes. I recommend *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* by Kenneth Kitchen. Dr. Kitchen, who passed away recently, was Professor of Orientology at the University of Liverpool. He was expert in the ancient languages of the Middle East. He could read hieroglyphics, hieratic, demotic and cuneiform as easily as you read English. He was recognized as one of the greatest scholars of any kind in his time. I suggest you start your research with his book. Then we’ll take it from there.”

I gave him a long look. “All right, where are we heading?”

“I think this teacher should sue, and I think you should bring the lawsuit. If you take the case, Mr. Taylor, and if you establish to a reasonable degree that the Bible dates back to deep antiquity, you will have undermined the ideological foundation of the neopagans. Then we can work together with our Christian and Muslim friends to convince the neopagan rank and file that the American Identity Party is the road to Hell.”