



Recap:

The six-year-old Sharabi twins, Yosef and Yonasan, review their studies at home in Sana'a, Yemen. Their mother lies in bed, critically ill, while their sister Mazal takes over the household chores. Avraham Sharabi, their father, is proud of his sons and their success in learning.

Three days later ...

The Sharabi home had been transformed. Avraham Sharabi was sitting on a low mourner's stool, his shoulders hunched and his eyes drowning in pools of grief. Yosef and Yonasan huddled together in a corner of the big room. They observed the many visitors who gathered in their home to comfort their father as he dealt with this most difficult blow.

"Why is everyone here?" Yosef whispered to his brother.

"Mazal said that it's a mitzvah," Yonasan explained, thrilled to know something his brother didn't. "It's called *ni-chum avei-lim*. And it means that they want to comfort us because *Ummi* is no longer here."

Yosef was not impressed with the knowledgeable answer. "This is not what I consider comfort!" he exclaimed hotly. "I don't need all these neighbors pinching my cheeks and clucking their sympathy! I want *Ummi*!"

His eyes glistened with unshed tears and Yosef made no move to wipe them away. From the other side of the room, Avraham Sharabi noticed his sons' confusion and distress. He called them over and put his arms around them in a

warm, tight embrace.

"Don't worry, my precious little boys," he whispered into their ears. "We will get through this together. You will continue to learn and grow, exactly as *Ummi* would have wanted you to do!"

Moshe Edni, their next-door neighbor, leaned over and asked, "Tell me the truth, Avraham. Have you made plans for your children's safety? How will you save them from their evil clutches?"

Save them? From their evil clutches?!

Yosef and Yonasan looked at the man with horror. Why were they in need of protection?! Could danger possibly be lurking behind their door, waiting for two little boys to innocently trip over it on their way out?

"No, I haven't finalized anything yet," their father replied calmly. "After the week of shivah, we will have to move to a new neighborhood where the soldiers won't be able to track us down."

Yosef looked at Yonasan. Yonasan looked at Yosef. Their horrified expressions would have been amusing, had the circumstances not been so frightening and confusing.

"*Abbi!*" Yosef exclaimed. "Why must we escape and hide?! Why do the soldiers want to find us?"

"Don't be afraid, my child," *Abbi* quietly replied. "You are certainly familiar with the dreaded Orphans' Decree that is in effect in Yemen."

Yosef nodded. One of his friends had once told him about it. The Arabs had introduced a decree stating that all orphans become the property of the state. The government is entitled to remove

orphans from their homes and force them to adopt the Muslim religion.

It was actually an old decree that had been in effect for hundreds of years. Recently, the Orphans' Decree had been reintroduced, when the new leader of Yemen, Imam Yachye Mohammed Hamid ed-Din*, assumed control of the land.

"But ... but ... but they can't take us away!" Yosef cried. "I won't go with them! Never!"

"Shh....," Avraham said, trying to calm his distraught son. "We live in the center of the Jewish Quarter, very far from our Arabic neighbors. It will take some time before the soldiers are informed that *Ummi* is no longer with us."

Yosef looked at his father with trust and hope. "Does that mean that we can stay here, in our own house? I really don't want to move, *Abbi*! How will *Ummi* know where to find us when Moshiach comes?!"

Avraham Sharabi dabbed at his eyes, determined to remain strong for his young children. "For the next few days, we can stay here," he reassured Yosef. "And even when we are forced to move, you don't have to worry, little one. *Ummi* will find us when Moshiach comes."

Moshe Edni leaned over slightly and conversed with their father in hushed tones. The twins were bored and impatient. They walked into the kitchen area in search of something to do.

"Look here, Yonasan!" Yosef suddenly called out.

He was standing near the kitchen window that faced their overgrown courtyard.

"It's Mustafa Garidi!" he continued. "*Abbi's* worker from the smithy!"

"That's strange," Yonasan remarked, coming to stand beside his brother. "Why is he standing in the courtyard behind our house?! Has he already forgotten where the entrance is?"

Yonasan laughed at the older man's mistake. He wondered why an Arab worker would come to the house of his Jewish employer, especially during the week of shivah. Did he also want to comfort *Abbi* in these difficult times?

Yosef rapped on the windowpane.

"Mustafa! Mustafa Garidi!" he called.

Mustafa looked in their direction and his lips turned up in a strained smile. He waved at the two young boys.

"Go around to the front," Yonasan yelled through the window. "The entrance is at the front of the house, not in the back!"

But Mustafa Garidi merely shook his head. He motioned to the twins that they should come join him in the courtyard. Glad to have something to do, the boys raced each other out the front door and around the house. They arrived in the courtyard, breathless and curious.

"My dear boys," Mustafa addressed them softly. "I assume that you haven't got much to do this week, hmm?"

"*Abbi* is busy talking to all our neighbors and uncles and everyone," Yosef complained. "And even Mazal has no time for us! She sits with the women and girls the whole entire day!"

Mustafa looked at them sharply, taking their measure. His next words were calculated

and he was careful to appear cool and matter-of-fact as he threw the question at them.

"But aren't you very busy packing your clothes and books?" he asked with a wily smile. "I'm sure that your father is planning to take you far, far away from Sana'a."

The boys said nothing.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, dear boys," Mustafa prodded them. "I have no doubt that you're headed somewhere far away."

"You also know about this terrible Orphans' Decree?" Yonasan exclaimed in wonder. "The government can capture us and take us away from our home forever! And they could even force us to become ... to become Muslims. Like you!"

Mustafa bit his lower lip. He was nervous. Very nervous.

He reached out and grabbed hold of Yonasan's sleeve. "Tell me what you know, boy! Your father is planning to escape?!"

Yonasan trembled in fright. What happened to the friendly, cheerful Mustafa Garidi? Why did *Abbi's* loyal worker sound so anxious and mean?! **k**

(To be continued ...)

* **Imam Yachya (1869–1948) ruled Yemen from 1904 until his assassination in 1948.**