

A Bedouin sheik declares himself King in eighteenth-century Palestine and falls in love with Tamar, a Jewish woman who is his equal in daring, determination, and wit.

Galilee Gold: A Novel

By Susie Aziz Pam

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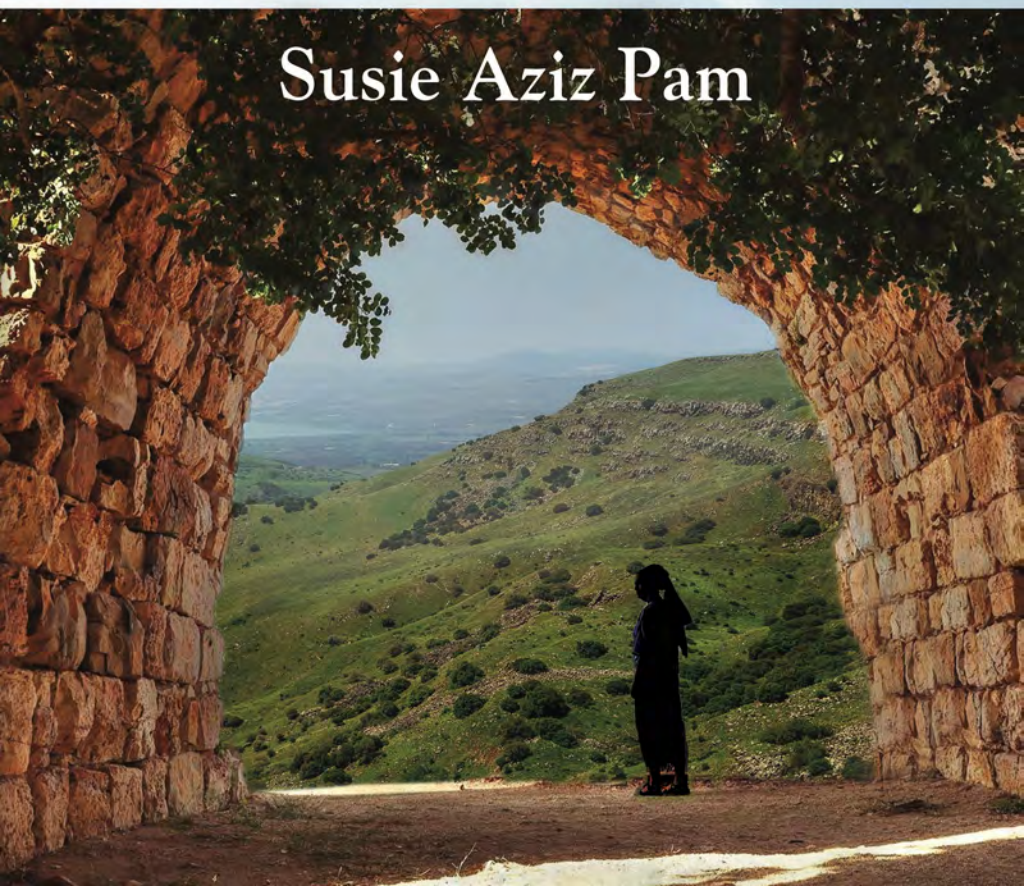
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1: The Encounter

The Galilee, Early Summer, 1725

The Bedouin on horseback observed the slow moving caravan of travelers from their perch in the tree-covered hillside above. The wagons pulled to a stop in a clearing near the spring. One young woman jumped down from the wagon and stole away from the caravan, running lightly towards the spring.

Tamar looked over her shoulder to make sure no one had seen her. It had been a long hot ride and her shoulders ached from driving the wagon all day. She looked up at the tall green trees and the way the mountain curved around the pool, protecting it on three sides. She kicked off her sandals and ran to the top of the waterfall. She looked down at the clear silver water wondering how dangerous it would be to jump. She held the hem of her blue dress with one hand and her headscarf with the other. She leaped. The last thing she saw before she fell were two men on horseback, hiding among the trees, watching. She plunged into the water with a splash. The two Bedouin looked at each other in amusement.

"Tamar! Are you here?" Another girl approached the spring.

"Oh, Rachel!" Tamar stood in the middle of the pond and sputtered, "I saw two men up there!" She pointed up towards the ledge.

"Stop joking, Tamar. There's no one up there," Rachel said. "But why are you here, splashing around in the pond, when you are needed to make the bread for supper?"

"I couldn't resist." Tamar said, still looking up into the hills. "I couldn't resist the water." She shook her head playfully, spraying water all around her.

"You're like wet puppy! If you're already wet will you fill this jug for me?" Rachel handed her the jug. Tamar knelt down to fill it.

Overlooking the spring, Ali whispered, "Time to go." He grabbed his horse's reins.

El-Omar hesitated, "One more second." The girl's headscarf had slipped down, revealing a mass of golden hair. Ali and el-Omar watched as she climbed out of the pool still holding the jug. Her wet dress clung to her body.

"This is the group you were waiting for!" Ali cried. "What language do they speak?"

"Yes, they are the Jews from Aleppo. They speak Aramaic, but they are fluent in Arabic as well. They came to settle in Tiberias on my invitation. They are under our protection and we must make sure no harm comes to them," el-Omar stated.

"Then we should go down and welcome them."

"Yes, we should." El-Omar brushed the dust from his shirt, "I don't look much like a king under all this dirt." They led their horses down towards the spring. They could see the girl in the blue dress picking up her sandals and laughing with her friend.

"She is magnificent," Ali said. "Wouldn't you like her in your harem?"

"I would but it's impossible," el-Omar said. "They're not like us. They are different. And I promised to protect them." He gave his horse a kick. "Besides, I have enough wives, at present."

Not wanting to alarm the travelers, they slowed their horses to a trot and approached the group cautiously from the other side of the clearing. "Introduce me," el-Omar ordered. Ali looked puzzled. "Introduce me to the leader of the caravan, and do a good job of it."

Ali dismounted and crossed to the man they had seen leading the group. "May I present the sheik Daher el-Omar, the sheik of sheiks, also known as the King of the Galilee. He welcomes you to the Holy Land and pledges his full protection."

The man bowed from the waist at the sight of the tall Bedouin on horseback. To Ali's relief, he answered in fluent if literary Arabic. "An honor to finally meet you. I am Moshe Ben-Asher, the leader of this caravan." Ben-Asher wore a clean suit of clothes and a fez on his head.

El-Omar dismounted and drew nearer to the leader. "I apologize for our appearance. We are on our way back from a long journey, hence our dusty traveling clothes. We would like to accompany you for a day or two. I understand you are on your way to Tiberias."

"I thank you for your protection and would like to express the gratitude of the Jews of Aleppo, who are eager to settle the Holy Land."

A chattering group of women walked past them, towards the spring, carrying jugs. El-Omar's eyes followed them as they walked. "Why are the young women wandering around unescorted?"

"We have an escort." Ben-Asher pointed to a uniformed guard on horseback. "There is one wagon of unmarried women. Their parents are still in Aleppo. The rest of the travelers are families. Now, please excuse me, I must tell my wife we have two honored guests for supper."

As the Bedouin walked towards the group, Ali nudged el-Omar, "You heard the man, the women are unmarried. They're fair game."

El-Omar closed his hand roughly on Ali's shoulder. "I warned you. They came on my invitation. We are here to safeguard them."

"Safeguard us? You haven't stopped staring at us," a woman's voice spoke in accented Arabic. "In Aleppo the servants know their place."

El-Omar looked down and realized it was the girl in the blue dress still balancing the heavy jug of water on her hip. Her feet were bare and her dress dripped water. She was even more lovely up close, with thick lashes and brown eyes flecked with gold. El-Omar placed his hands on the jug. "Let me help you."

The girl stepped out of his reach. "No need." She turned and started back towards her group. "But there are more girls down by the water who could use some help," she called over her shoulder. The men stared at her. "Go on."

El-Omar looked at Ali. "She thinks we're servants," he burst out laughing. He was more amused than offended. Perhaps a bit offended, he admitted to himself. Even so, he and Ali ran down the path to the spring and, without asking, picked up the jugs of water and carried them back to camp.

Seeking another opportunity to talk to the girl, el-Omar approached her and asked, "Where should I place this?" Looking around, she pointed to a spot next to the campfire. "Right over there. Please bring me a sack of flour from the mules."

"Of course," el-Omar replied. He turned to the horses and whispered something in Ali's ear. Ali drew a long knife from his saddlebag and strapped it to his belt. "Block their view."

El-Omar stood with his back to the camp and began loosening the saddle from Ali's horse. His broad shoulders obstructed the view of anyone who was watching. Ali crept behind the wagons and horses and slipped away up to the surrounding hills. El-Omar did the same for his horse and led the two horses towards the spring.

"A sack of flour, please," came an exasperated voice next to him.

El-Omar turned to her, "As soon as I water the horses, with your permission. They have worked hard today and are thirsty."

"Can't the other servant take care of that?" the girl demanded.

"He's somewhat occupied at the moment. Here," he handed the girl the reins. "Hold this. I'll bring the flour." Walking towards the pack mules, he wondered how long he'd have to keep up the charade. He freed the sack of flour and looked at the girl for further instructions. She pointed towards the camp.

He lifted the sack onto his shoulder and brought it towards the circle of women, who sat peeling and slicing vegetables. He set it down and came back to the girl, who had led the horses to

the edge of the spring to drink. The bottom of her dress dragged in the water, but she did not seem to notice.

He saw some movement up in the hills and a moment later Ali stepped out and waved his arms. El-Omar waved back. Then he turned his attention to the girl, who was now also looking up at Ali.

"What is he doing there?" she asked.

"He thought he saw some wild boar," he said, taking the reins back from her. "They can be dangerous. You did a good job with our horses. Thank you . . . "

"Tamar! Are you coming?" someone called from the other side of the camp.

"Thank you, Tamar," he repeated.

"You were watching us from behind the trees, weren't you?" she asked.

"I'm sorry if we frightened you."

"Tamar! The bread!" Tamar spotted her friend, Rachel, waving to her.

She began backing away from him, "I have to go and make bread now." She crossed the clearing to the camp and sat down with the other women to prepare the dough.

"That servant over there can't take his eyes off you," Rachel observed, handing Tamar the large sifter. Tamar glanced up and saw that he was walking the horses back from the spring. "He is the most handsome Bedouin I've ever seen," Rachel continued.

"Oh hush, Rachel, how many Bedouin have you met? But he doesn't act like any of the servants we had in Aleppo." Tamar

turned her attention to the flour that Rachel was shoveling into the sifter with her hands.

"A bit more, that's enough. . . .stop!" Tamar ordered. "Leave the sack here, but fetch me some water." As Tamar glanced at the servant's receding back, she thought how striking he was, if rather dusty and sweaty. He was also strong -- he had lifted the sack of flour as if it weighed nothing. His confidence and intelligence intrigued her. He was no ordinary servant.

2: An Introduction

Ali met el-Omar in a small thicket of trees. He quickly took the horses' reins. "Allow me to do that, Sire."

"These horses have been watered, courtesy of Tamar, the girl with the golden hair," el-Omar said. "What did you discover on your patrol?"

"I found footprints, someone has been watching this caravan. I think they may have been scared off when they saw us. For now we are safe,"

"It better not be my brother's tribe. Yussuf—they have a camp not far from here. He knows I will not bide any attacks on travelers. I warned him! I will stop in to see him on our way back to Jeddin," el-Omar said. "For now, I'm going to wash in the spring." He turned back to the water. I'm so dirty, no wonder that girl took me for a servant. He removed his shirt, washed it out, and hung it on a branch to dry while he waded into the deep end of the pool. He submerged in the cool water and washed his head and face. Ali soon joined him, splashing water everywhere.

Tamar had finished sifting the flour. What was taking Rachel so long to bring a jug of water? She stood up to look, but Rachel was nowhere in sight, so she walked down towards the spring.

She found Rachel standing behind a tree, not moving. "Sssh, look," she whispered.

"What? Rachel, I'm in the middle of making dough. I need more water," she insisted, grabbing the jug from her and walking up to the spring. Suddenly she heard men's voices, but it was too late to turn back. She stared at the sight of the two men bathing in the pool, their clothes hanging on a branch.

"Oh!" Tamar reddened, but she looked straight ahead. She bent to fill the jug, keeping her eyes anywhere but on them. In her confusion, she didn't notice that her headscarf had slipped off.

She straightened up and hauled the jug out of the water. There was a splash as el-Omar got to his feet. "Please let me help you."

"No."

"Wait, you dropped this." El-Omar held her headscarf, now sopping wet, in his large hand. He draped it around her neck, the wet silk cool against her burning skin.

"Thank you," she whispered, still not daring to meet his eyes. She turned and hurried back to the camp, where she ran straight into her uncle, Moshe Ben-Asher. He noticed her flushed face and uncovered hair.

"Just bringing some water, Uncle," she said, trying to hurry past him. He stopped her with a hand on her arm.

"Please, Tamar," he paused, "have a care with your appearance. I did promise your parents to look after you. Your hair has become undone in a most immodest way." Tamar fumbled with her scarf, trying to tie her unruly hair back with one hand while holding the jug of water with the other.

"Yes, Uncle," she sighed, running to where the women were cooking over the fire. She set down the jug and took the *saj*,

maneuvering the iron dome over the flames to heat up. Then she sank to her knees and poured water onto the waiting flour. She hoped her face wasn't too red.

"Don't let the *saj* get too hot, Tamar, or you'll burn the bread," one of the older women warned.

"I know what I'm doing." Tamar took out a small clay jar and added a sour-smelling lump of leaven to the dough. She began pounding and kneading the dough much too hard, beating the life out of it. It was already late, so there was no time to let it rise. She pulled off fistfuls of dough, rolled them between her hands until they were flat, and patted them onto the hot *saj* to bake. The bread blistered and turned black filling the air with a smell of smoke.

"No wonder she can't find a husband, she burns everything she touches!" one of the women whispered, and her friends giggled. Tamar bit her lip and ignored them, but Rachel came to her aid.

"Pay no attention to them. They're just old busy bodies," she whispered in Tamar's ear. She knelt next to Tamar and together they finished the bowl of dough. They now had a basket full of dry flat bread, most of which was charred.

"I am so embarrassed," Tamar said.

"Let's go back to the spring," Rachel tugged at her arm. "The servants must be gone by now."

"Am I as dirty as I feel?" Tamar asked.

"Um . . . yes," Rachel admitted. "One cheek is covered in flour and the other in soot."

"I can't cook. I'm covered in flour and my clothes smell of smoke," Tamar groaned. "What man would want to marry me?"

"Oh, don't listen to their nasty tongues," Rachel said.

"Well, you can talk. You're betrothed to my brother, David. You'll probably be married before the winter!" Again Tamar slipped off her sandals and jumped into the cold pool, dress and all.

"Tamar!" Rachel squealed, "What are you doing?" She knelt and rinsed her hands and face, taking care not to wet her clothes.

"This is heaven! Come join me!"

"I only meant to wash our hands and faces!" Rachel protested.

"I know, but I just had to," Tamar replied, floating on her back. "The horses get washed down, why can't I? Besides I'm too ashamed to show my face at the meal, after I ruined all the bread." She climbed out of the spring and sat on the ground to dry off. She twisted the hem of her dress around her hand to wring out the water. "Oh Rachel, I am not going to make any man a good wife."

"Yes, you will," Rachel began running her fingers through Tamar's wet tangled hair, "What about Yotam?"

"Oh, Yotam," Tamar scoffed, "I only met him a few times in Aleppo. He came to see my brothers, not me. And then he went off to study in Tzfat. He could be married by now."

"You said he was nice. And maybe he's not married yet. Maybe he's waiting for you." She pulled Tamar's hair into a long braid.

"I wrote David to tell him I was coming. But, I don't know," Tamar stood up, tying her scarf around her hair. "But I do know I'm famished."

"So am I," said Rachel, standing up. "Let's go and eat. We'll sneak in quietly so no one will see us."

Tamar was startled to see the two Bedouin sitting in a place of honor next to her uncle and the other men of the group. Not only that, but her uncle was running back and forth serving them, bringing them more bread and offering them water. She and Rachel tiptoed towards their friends.

To her horror, her uncle called her name and waved his hand towards them, "There she is! Tamar, come here." She walked slowly towards the men, holding tightly to Rachel's hand.

"Yes, Uncle?" she said, looking down at the puddle made by her dripping dress and hair.

"You're all wet," he chided her.

"Yes, Uncle," was all she could manage.

"Your Majesty," her uncle began in Arabic, "may I present my niece, Tamar. This is Daher el-Omar, the King of the Galilee. And his aid, Ali."

Tamar looked from el-Omar to Ali as her uncle's words sank in. She blinked and opened her mouth to say something, but no words would come. She squeezed Rachel's hand, managed a quick curtsy, and fled, dragging Rachel behind her. When they were out of earshot, she said, "That is Daher el-Omar? *The* Daher el-Omar, the sheik of sheiks? The King of the Galilee?" She grabbed her friend's shoulders.

"So what if he is?"

"Oh Rachel, you don't know what I did! What I said! I was so rude to him."

"My father said he's not even a real king. He crowned himself the King of the Galilee."

"That doesn't change anything. But it would explain why he's so handsome and proud. And he let me order him around like a common servant!" Rachel turned away and burst into peals of laughter. She laughed until tears ran down her cheeks and she couldn't stand up any more. "Stop laughing, it's not funny! He'll have me executed or imprisoned or sent back!" Tamar sat down and covered her face with her hands. "I'm so humiliated! How could I have done such a thing? "

"It will be all right." Rachel took Tamar's hand and led her back towards the camp. They were out of sight but able to hear the conversation.

El-Omar looked with amusement to where Tamar and her friend had run off. "Tell me," he addressed Tamar's uncle, "why are these young unmarried women traveling on their own?"

"There is a serious shortage of young men in our community in Aleppo," her uncle began. "Many of them are here, studying in the houses of learning in Tzfat and Tiberias, thanks to Your Majesty's generosity. So in order to encourage marrying within the community, and settlement of the land, we brought the young women here to their betrothed."

"And your niece? Is she betrothed?"

Ben-Asher laughed, "Tamar? Oh no, she is not betrothed yet. That girl is so headstrong and stubborn that she has turned down all the marriage offers she has received. And there have been many of them. Her parents sent her here in the hope that she would find a husband. She's almost twenty." He shook his head sadly.

"I see," el-Omar said, smiling again.

As the fires died out, the travelers began to roll out their bedclothes and prepare to sleep. The families slept in their wagons, while the girls slept together at one side of the camp. El-Omar and Ali began to open their bedrolls close to where the girls were camped.

Tamar approached them. "What are you doing? You can't sleep here. Kindly go to the other side of the camp."

El-Omar looked up at her. "You do know that we are not servants, correct?"

"Yes?"

"And yet you continue to give us orders."

Tamar was taken aback. "I did say kindly, Your Majesty. I am very sorry, but this is the girls' camp and you cannot sleep so close to us. It isn't proper."

El-Omar picked up his bedroll and began backing away. "Will you tell me how far away is proper?" He had nearly reached the edge of the clearing when Tamar called to him to stop.

"That's far enough. Good night." She watched Ali gather up his things too, a wide grin on his face. Just as she sat down, she saw her uncle approach and exchange a few words with el-Omar. Then he turned and marched towards Tamar.

"Tamar! This behavior is entirely objectionable. I demand that you stop antagonizing the King," her uncle whispered loudly.

"But I didn't . . . Yes, Uncle. Good night, Uncle," she said obediently. She lay down next to Rachel with a somber look on

her face. Then they both burst out laughing, covering their faces with their blankets so as not to wake the others.

El-Omar observed the exchange from afar. He had not meant for her uncle to chastise her on his account. He enjoyed watching Tamar banter with her friends. Her eyes lit up when she laughed, which was often. She was whispering to Rachel now, touching her friend's shoulder with her slim fingers. He wanted her to look at him like that and whisper to him. He wanted to feel her hands on his skin, her breath in his ear. She wasn't like any of his wives, or for that matter, like any other woman he knew. She made him laugh.

Rachel fell asleep easily but Tamar squirmed uncomfortably on her thin pallet. She had overheard her uncle saying, 'Oh no, she is not betrothed yet.' She knew that she was stubborn, opinionated, and independent. She knew that many frowned on a girl who could ride horses and knew how to read. Her parents were not like that. They had encouraged her to study the holy books with her brothers.

Tamar looked up at the dark sky and wondered about Yotam. What did he look like now? She hadn't seen him in such a long time. Her thoughts kept returning to the King. He was handsome. She liked how his green eyes crinkled when he smiled, and his deep laugh. He was strong, smart, and kind. He had volunteered to chaperone them to Tiberias.

Tamar saw that the moon had now risen on the horizon. It was almost full. "Last month at this time I was safe at home with my family. I left it all to come to a new land in order to find a husband." It comforted her to think that this same moon was shining on her home in Aleppo. Maybe her mother was looking

up at it too, thinking of her. Her parents were concerned about the number of suitors that she had frightened away. They had viewed this journey to the Holy Land as a blessed opportunity.

"We hope that Yotam will appreciate your knowledge and character," her mother had said. "And if not Yotam, you'll find someone else, learned and kind."

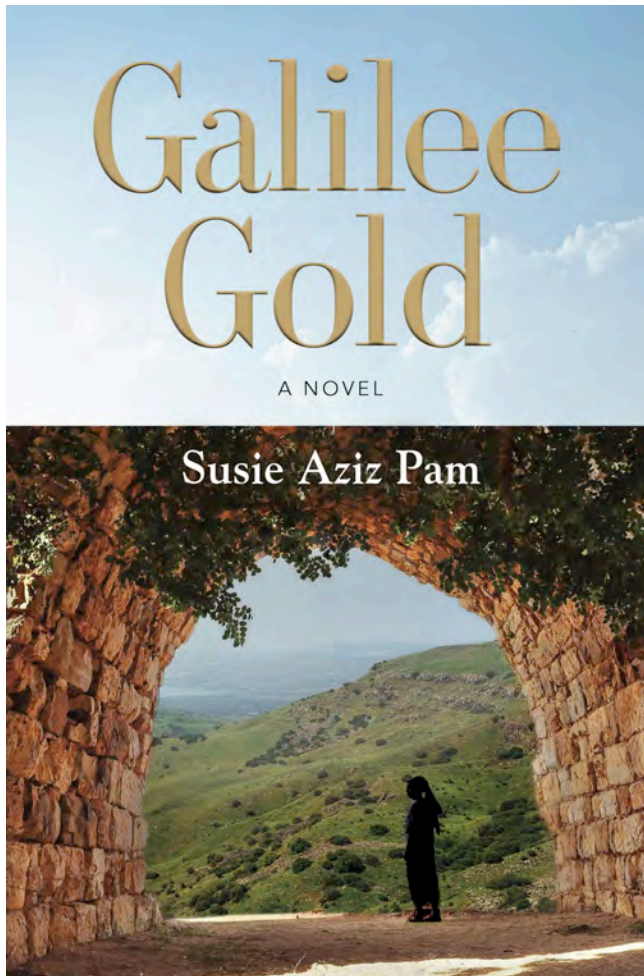
"Yes, Tamar," her father said. "If this Yotam doesn't work out, find someone else. You can always stay with your uncle while you are waiting. Don't settle for just anyone. You are a treasure. If after a year you are still not betrothed, come back to Aleppo."

"Yes," she thought, "if things don't work out, I can always go back to Aleppo."

Susie Aziz Pam is an Israeli writer who writes in English. She is living the dream on a kibbutz near Jerusalem, with her husband and family. When she is not writing, she spends her time swimming, gardening, crocheting with recycled materials, and baby-sitting her grandchildren.

Galilee Gold is her first published novel.





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