

A Tale of Two Sinners

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Life is bleak for released prisoner 24601. Since leaving prison, a yellow certificate of discharge has been his only companion. It is a mark of Cain, a reminder to him and a proclamation to others of his criminal past. He cannot bear the weight of this tainted identity. He changes his name to Father Madeleine. In time, he becomes an esteemed industrialist famed for his generosity, an upstanding member of the community. He no longer answers to the name Jean Valjean.

Prisoner 24601 appears to have set himself on the high road: “Having established himself at Montreuil-sur-mer, happy to feel his conscience saddened by the past and the last half of his existence giving the lie to the first, he lived peacefully, reassured and hopeful, with two remaining thoughts: To conceal his name and to sanctify his life; to escape men and to return to God.”¹ And yet, the past still casts its long shadow over Father Madeleine. In one of the most powerful moments of Victor Hugo’s masterpiece *Les Misérables*, Madeleine must publicly acknowledge his true identity in order to save an innocent man from being wrongly convicted. Compelled by his conscience to take the witness stand, Madeleine declares: “I am Jean Valjean.... I have done my best. I have hidden under a name, I have become

rich; I became a mayor. I wanted to live again among honest people. It seems this cannot be.”²

Despite having paid his debt to society, Jean Valjean remains a prisoner of his past. In this, Hugo’s fictional character exemplifies the plight of the *baal tshuva*, the Hebrew term for a person who has repented his misdeeds and changed his ways. Like the reformed ex-convict, the baal tshuva must contend with profound social challenges. To be sure, religion, law, and psychology all recognize that a person is *capable* of meeting these challenges and of positively, even radically, transforming his life. Yet it does not necessarily follow from this acknowledgment that society will accept him. One can hardly blame a community for its reluctance to entrust a public office to a former prisoner, and many parents are similarly averse to placing their children’s education in the hands of a teacher with a less than exemplary past—to take just two examples among many.

While the social challenges facing the baal tshuva are enormous, by far the greatest struggle takes place within his own soul. For the far-reaching change he desires to achieve may require him to denounce aspects of his past, repress certain memories, and even dissociate himself from people and places he once held dear. In other words, by opening a new spiritual chapter in his life, he has simultaneously cast all previous chapters in doubt. He may thus be wracked with uncertainty. He wonders how he can reconcile who he once was with who he intends to be. How can one person contain two different selves, one a sinner and the other redeemed? Must he deny his prior identity in order to create a new one? Or is it possible—even preferable—to carry his old self with him?

The dilemmas that plague the baal tshuva troubled our sages as well. On the one hand, as wholehearted believers in the possibility of personal improvement, they were awake to the promise of tshuva. On the other hand, they were all too aware of how difficult its practical realization is. Hence, the sages handled the spiritual and social predicament of the baal tshuva with particular care, as evidenced by the two rabbinic stories discussed here.

The first story, from *Sifre Numbers*, recounts the tale of a Gentile prostitute who abandons the world of sin, converts, and marries a Jewish yeshiva student. The second story is taken from the talmudic tractate *Bava Metzia*. It describes the life of Resh Lakish, a bandit in his youth who went on to become a famous scholar. As we will see, both of these stories demonstrate the complex ethical and psychological outlook inherent in the Jewish approach to repentance, expressed succinctly in the saying of Resh Lakish: “Tshuva is great, for it turns one’s vices into virtues.”³

We begin with the story of the prostitute who converts to Judaism following her encounter with a yeshiva student. The student, having heard rumors of her expensive services, travels halfway across the world to partake of them. He manages to overcome his lust at the last moment, however, and in so doing sparks the fire of religious awakening in the prostitute:

It happened that there was a certain man who was very careful about the commandment of fringes. He heard that there was a certain prostitute in the seaside cities who would receive four hundreds gold pieces as her fee. He sent her four hundred gold pieces, and she fixed a time for him [to visit her].

As soon as his time arrived he came and seated himself at the door of her house. Her maidservant entered and said to her: That man for whom you have fixed a time, he is sitting at the door of the house. She said to her: Let him enter.

As soon as he entered, she spread out seven silver cushions and one of gold for him, and she was upon the uppermost, and between each cushion there were supports of silver, and the uppermost one was of gold. And as soon as he approached to do the deed, his four fringes came forth and they appeared to him like four witnesses, and they slapped him across the face.

Immediately he withdrew and he sat upon the floor. She also withdrew and sat upon the floor.

She said to him: Agape of Rome!⁴ I will not let you go until you tell me what defect you have seen in me!

He said to her: By the temple service! I have not seen any defect in you, for there is no one with your beauty in all the world. But the Lord our God has ordered us to follow this one small commandment, and written concerning it, “I am the Lord your God... I am the Lord your God”—two times. “I am the Lord your God”: I am to pay reward; “I am the Lord your God”: I am to exact punishment.

She said to him: By the temple service! I will not let you go until you write for me your name, and the name of your city, and the name of the beit midrash where you study Tora. And he wrote for her his name, and the name of his city, and his teacher, and the name of the beit midrash where he studied Tora.

And she arose and distributed her wealth—one third to the government, one third to the poor, and one third she took with her, and she came and she stood within the beit midrash of R. Hiyya.

She said to him: Rabbi, convert me!

He said to her: Perhaps you have set your eyes on one of the students [of my beit midrash]. She showed him the note.

He said [to the student]: Arise! Take possession of what you have purchased. The beddings which she spread for you while prohibited to you, she will spread out for you with full permission.⁵

Much as we would expect, the story opens by focusing on the student, the “natural” hero of our tale. After his aborted encounter with the prostitute, however, he effectively disappears from the narrative. Now she becomes the main character and leads the story back to its point of origin—the beit midrash, the house of study. While the student’s role in the story is worthy of analysis in and of itself, I will concentrate here on the ethical and religious transformation undergone by the prostitute, a heroine not only by dint of circumstance but also on account of her independence and assertiveness in pursuing virtue.

Let us begin by examining the story's basic plot. When the student first presents himself to the prostitute, she does not sense anything extraordinary about him. On the contrary, he is just another paying customer, so to speak. But then the student surprises the prostitute by rejecting her. The baffled prostitute assumes his rejection must be the result of a physical imperfection. She gets off the bed, sits beside him, and demands, "What defect have you seen in me?" It is now, when he and the prostitute are both literally and figuratively exposed to one another, that the student expounds upon the essence of his belief in God, reward, and punishment. His words shake her to the core. She sends him away but not before asking for his name, the city in which he lives, and the address of his yeshiva. Immediately thereafter, the prostitute discards two-thirds of the cumulative wages of her sins. She then goes in search of the student, bringing with her the remaining money and the unused bedclothes she had prepared for him.⁶

When she arrives at the *beit midrash*, the *rabbi* questions her motives: "Perhaps you have set your eyes on one of the students?" The *rabbi* fears that the prostitute has been driven by her sexual appetite, but her note reveals that her heart is fixed on the student, and not her eyes. The *rabbi* turns to the student and commands him, "Arise! Take possession of what you have purchased." Significantly, these words not only affirm the newly transformed relationship between the characters, but also change the symbolic meaning of the various material objects mentioned in the story. The four hundred gold coins given to the prostitute by the student, for example, ("despised money" according to Jewish law),⁷ undergo a conversion of their own, as her "fee" now becomes her dowry. Her bedclothes also become her wedding truss: "The beddings which she spread for you while prohibited to you, she will spread out for you with full permission." Finally the sheets and blankets that once accommodated paying customers now become the foundation of a household governed according to the laws of Moses.

The distinctiveness of this story's conception of repentance and the relationship between the *baal tshuva's* past, present, and future becomes clear

when we compare it to the following Christian story that originated among circles of Egyptian monks during the fourth or fifth century C.E.:

There was a certain harlot called Thaïs and she was so beautiful that many for her sake sold all that they had and reduced themselves to utter poverty; quarrels arose among her lovers, and often the doorstep of this girl's house was soaked in the blood of young men. When Abba Paphnutius heard about it, he put on normal clothes and went to see her in a certain city in Egypt. He handed her a silver piece as the price for committing sin. She accepted the price and said, "Let us go inside." When he went in, he sat down on the bed which was draped with precious covers and he invited her, saying, "If there is a more private chamber, let us go in there." She said, "There is one, but if it is people you are afraid of, no one ever enters this room, except, of course, for God, for there is no place that is hidden from the eyes of divinity." When the old man heard this, he said to her, "So you know there is a God?" She answered him, "I know about God and about the eternal kingdom and also about the future torments of sinners." "But if you know this," he said, "why are you causing the loss of so many souls so that you will be condemned to render an account not only of your own sins but of theirs as well?" When Thaïs heard this, she threw herself at the feet of Paphnutius and begged him with tears, "Give me a penance, Father, for I trust to find forgiveness by your prayers. I beg you to wait for just three hours, and after that, wherever you tell me to go, I will go, and whatever you tell me to do, I will do it." So Paphnutius arranged a meeting place with her and she went out and collected together all the goods that she had received by her sins and piled them all together in the middle of the city, while all the people watched, saying, "Come here, all of you that have sinned with me, and see how I am burning whatever you gave me."

When it was all consumed, she went to the place that the Father had arranged with her. Then he sought out a monastery of virgins and took her into a small cell, sealing the door with lead and leaving only a small opening through which food could be passed to her and he ordered her to be given daily a little bread and a little water by the sisters of the monastery.

When Thaïs realized that that the door was sealed with lead, she said to him, “Father, where do you want me to urinate?” and he replied, “in the cell, as you deserve.” Then she asked him how she should pray to God, and he said to her, “You are not worthy to name God, or to take his divine name upon your lips, or to lift up your hands to heaven, for your lips are full of sin and your hands are stained with iniquity; only stand facing toward the east and repeat often only this: “You who made me, have mercy upon me.”⁸

It is hard to ignore the resemblance between this early Christian legend and the Jewish midrash. Both describe a pious man leaving his home to meet a prostitute; in both cases, the meeting results in a dialogue regarding the tenets of faith and the moral order; and in each tale, at the behest of the pious man, the prostitute abandons her life of sin, discards her property, and enters the world of religion.

And yet, the similarities between the two stories only serve to emphasize their profoundly *different* approaches to repentance. The first and most remarkable difference is one of motive. The Christian saint is moved to visit the prostitute by his faith, his sense of morality, and his interest in preventing bloodshed among young men. The Jewish student, on the other hand, is motivated by simple lust. The Christian legend contrasts a perfect saint (the pious Father Paphnutius) with a perfect sinner (the prostitute), whereas in the midrash, *neither* of the heroes exemplifies perfection—they both sin, they both repent, and they both receive their just rewards.

The critical difference between the midrash and the Christian legend, however, is demonstrated by the *type* of conversion each of the two prostitutes undergoes. In the midrash, the female protagonist undertakes her actions independently—the student does not attempt to convince her, nor does she require his convincing. She is promised neither marriage nor redemption, but rather undertakes both of her own accord. In the Christian story, by contrast, the prostitute entrusts herself completely to the priest,

pledging to follow his will to the letter. Other Christian stories repeat this motif: A sinning woman obeys her redeemer unquestioningly out of fear that, left to herself, she will be overwhelmed by her own appetites.⁹ Indeed, there is only one point at which the harlot Thaïs acts as an autonomous subject: She chooses to burn all her property in the town square.¹⁰ Yet here again, the apparent similarity between the two narratives belies a critical difference: While the Egyptian prostitute attempts to destroy the spoils of the world of sin completely, the prostitute of the Jewish story brings her belongings—the bedclothes and her remaining money—with her to the *beit midrash*.

Finally, the Jewish and Christian stories diverge dramatically in their descriptions of the way in which the penitent women are integrated into religious society. Thaïs is isolated from the virgins of the monastery as though her sin were a contagious disease. The Jewish convert, by contrast, is accepted as an equal member in the community. She is not asked to demonstrate remorse or acknowledge her guilt. The newborn Christian is sentenced to a life of mortification and suppressed desire, but the Jewish convert returns to the bedroom—this time with her new husband. To be fair, in the continuation of the Christian story, Thaïs is also rewarded with her own wedding bed. Yet this reward appears in a climactic, mystical vision as she lies dying, and the groom is God himself. Thaïs' longed-for “conversion” is achieved only upon her death, which itself brings an end to her three-year trauma of physical and psychological torture in a sealed cell.¹¹

Clearly, these narratives represent two entirely different concepts of sin and repentance. According to early Christian theology, no one is completely innocent; even babies are born tainted by original sin. Moreover, memories of one's sins forever haunt the regretful offender, and past transgressions sentence one to a life of obsessive self-oppression. Crucially, the believer is powerless to redeem himself—help can come only through an external savior. Finally, Thaïs' imprisonment is a powerful symbolic expression of the penitent's existential condition. The walls of her cell cut her off from the past and guard against the temptation to return to deviance. Moreover, they also separate her from the rest of society. At the

end of the rehabilitation process, the immoral Thaïs does indeed become pure, but only after she has destroyed her previous self. Like the mythical phoenix rising from the ashes, the birth of the Christian believer follows from the annihilation of the sinner. The new shoot flourishes only after the old tree is felled.

The midrash presents a very different picture of sin and repentance. Sin, according to Judaism, is a *human* error and is therefore within human power to rectify. Society's acceptance of the baal tshuva depends upon those actions that he commits of his own free will. For example, if he has indeed regretted his transgressions, society does not treat him as a dangerous person to be avoided or a despicable creature to be shunned. Rather, it offers him an opportunity to find a new place within the community.

Furthermore, the Christian concept of conversion (from the Latin *conversio*, meaning "going the other way") involves erasing the past and, at times, even death. Judaism, on the other hand, offers the possibility of continuity. As we have seen, the sinning woman of the Jewish story is not forced to leave her entire past behind. Rather, she enters the beit midrash bearing her old bedclothes and part of the money she earned in her previous life. The message is clear: The new self can coexist with the old.

This point raises an entirely new question, however: What aspects of his past life should the baal tshuva integrate into his new one? For surely not everything can be "brought into the beit midrash." Although the prostitute does keep her bedclothes and a third of her capital, she abandons a substantial part of her property, along with her former occupation. Symbolically, her actions make clear that the past and the present cannot entirely mingle. What should remain and what should be discarded? The next story deals with precisely this problem.

The midrash we have just discussed endorses the idea of maintaining biographical continuity. In a sense, the following story picks up where the first one left off, investigating the personal and social consequences of

integrating the penitent's previous self into a new and righteous life. Two impressive figures are the focal points of the narrative: Resh Lakish, a prominent talmudic sage of the generation of the *amoraim*, or talmudic rabbis; and R. Yohanan, who led Resh Lakish from the life of a rogue to that of Tora and *mitzvot*:

One day, R. Yohanan was bathing in the Jordan. When Resh Lakish saw him, he mistook him for a woman, fixed his spear in the Jordan, and leapt to its opposite bank.

When R. Yohanan saw R. Simon, Son of Lakish, he said to him: Your strength should be for the Tora.

Resh Lakish replied: Your beauty should be for women.

R. Yohanan said: If you will repent, I will give you my sister [in marriage], who is more beautiful than I.

He undertook [to repent]; then he wished to return [to the other bank of the river], to bring his things, but [R. Yohanan] would not allow him.

Subsequently, [R. Yohanan] taught him Scripture and Mishna, and made him into a great man.

One day there was a dispute in the *beit midrash*: A sword, knife, dagger, handsaw and a scythe—at what stage [of their manufacture] can they become unclean? [When their manufacturing is finished. And when is their manufacturing finished?]

R. Yohanan said: When they are tempered in a furnace.

Resh Lakish said: When they have been furbished in water.

Said R. Yohanan to him: A robber understands robbery.

Said [Resh Lakish] to him: And wherewith have you benefited me? There [among the brigands] I was called master, and here I am called master.

R. Yohanan therefore became distraught.

Resh Lakish fell ill.

His sister [R. Yohanan's sister, the wife of Resh Lakish] came and wept before him: Pray for him, for me!

He took no notice of her.

[She said to him]: Pray for him, for the sake of my children.

He said to her: "Leave thy fatherless children, I will preserve them alive" (Jeremiah 49:11).

[She said to him:] For the sake of my widowhood then!

He said to her: "And let thy widows trust in me" (Jeremiah 49:11).

Resh Lakish died.

R. Yohanan was plunged into deep grief.

The rabbis said: What shall we do to ease his mind? Let us bring R. Elazar ben Padat, whose legal traditions are more honed, and we will seat him before him.

So they brought R. Elazar ben Padat and sat him before him; and on every dictum uttered by R. Yohanan he brought a *tannaitic*¹² tradition which supported [R. Yohanan's] opinion.

Said [R. Yohanan]: Is this what I require? Son of Lakish, when I made a statement, he used to raise twenty-four objections against me, to which I gave twenty-four solutions, which consequently expanded the comprehension of the law; whilst you bring me a tannaitic tradition which supports me. Do I not know that my statements are accurate?

He used to go around and call at the doors: Son of Lakish, where are you? until he became insane.

Thereupon the rabbis prayed for mercy for him, and he died.¹³

The first encounter between R. Yohanan and Resh Lakish is a clash of titans: A leading sage of Israel and the chief of a posse of bandits meet on the banks of the Jordan River.¹⁴ The bandit, spying the handsome rabbi washing himself in the current from afar, believes that he has encountered an attractive woman and jumps into the river with lust in his heart. Amazingly, the naked rabbi does not seem especially alarmed by the thug bounding toward him, and he merely admonishes: "Your strength should be for the Tora." The frustrated Resh Lakish, having discovered that the object of his desire is in fact a man, replies: "Your beauty should be for women." It is hard to miss the cynicism in Resh Lakish's response: Just as it is unlikely that R. Yohanan will use his good looks to seduce women, so too is it unlikely that the bandit will direct his strength toward learning Tora and following its commandments.

But R. Yohanan is not dissuaded. Instead, he tries to tempt Resh Lakish, going so far as to offer up his own sister's hand in marriage. The proposal meets with the bandit's approval, and he assents to R. Yohanan's terms. On the most basic level, we may interpret this exchange as confirmation of Resh Lakish's soft spot for beautiful women. On a deeper level, however, the proposal represents something much more meaningful: R. Yohanan's faith in him. The rabbi, by offering his own sister as the bandit's wife, indicates that he truly believes in the possibility that the latter will become a new person.

True to R. Yohanan's premonition, the next scene presents a changed Resh Lakish. After many years of study with R. Yohanan, he himself has become a leading scholar. He is even, we see, debating R. Yohanan on matters of halacha, in this case the question "When is their manufacturing [of metal instruments] finished?" This is, as we will see, a matter of great halachic significance, since a metal instrument may be rendered ritually impure only after its construction is complete. R. Yohanan rules that the product is considered complete from the moment it comes out of the blast furnace. Resh Lakish counters that the instrument is finished only after it has been properly polished. The argument brings R. Yohanan to the boiling point. He mutters angrily, "A robber understands [the craft of] robbery," which means: "You are still a robber! You have not changed one bit!" The stunned Resh Lakish is deeply wounded. He falls ill, never to recuperate.

One might dismiss R. Yohanan's behavior as a momentary emotional outburst, were it not for his subsequent behavior. Resh Lakish's wife comes to her brother and begs him to reconcile with her husband, in order that his life be saved. He is unmoved. She then pleads with him at least to pray for her husband—if only for her own sake and that of her children. He responds by quoting Jeremiah's furious prophecy to Edom: "Leave thy fatherless children, I will preserve them alive, and let thy widows trust in me."¹⁵ Implicit in R. Yohanan's quotation is a comparison of Resh Lakish to Esau, father of the nation of Edom, of whom it was said: "And by thy sword shalt thou live."¹⁶ Clearly, R. Yohanan believes that he has erred in marrying his sister to a bandit, and now he must bear responsibility for his

mistake. Though your husband may die, he tells his sister, I will care for you and your children.

The emotional turmoil that results from what begins as a purely theoretical discussion of halacha makes clear that there is more to the seemingly technical debate between R. Yohanan and Resh Lakish than meets the eye. Indeed, the debate may be said to have two deeper levels of meaning: First, it explores man's outlook toward the world; and second, it articulates the ethical, spiritual, and moral aspects of tshuva.

The profoundly different worldviews of R. Yohanan and Resh Lakish are reflected in the position each of them takes with respect to the question "When is their manufacturing finished?" To recount: According to R. Yohanan, a metal instrument is considered complete from the moment it is passed through the fire of the blast furnace—that is, after the metal has been purified, but before it has assumed its final form. Resh Lakish's position (which, it should be noted, is also the customarily accepted opinion in halachic literature) reflects a more realistic approach: It holds that an object is complete only after the craftsman touches it for the last time—in other words, only after the product has been polished.¹⁷

Why does Resh Lakish's position infuriate R. Yohanan so? It appears that R. Yohanan is frustrated by his friend's obstinate inclination to focus upon an object's external aspect instead of on its internal essence. To R. Yohanan, the difference between a sharp blade and dull metal is negligible at best; either way, he believes, the object retains its essential identity as a tool of violence. Resh Lakish's perspective, by contrast, seems to suit that of a bandit—a man who sees meaning primarily in the surface of things. After all, what self-respecting robber would equate a lump of metal with a sword? His emphasis on appearances reminds R. Yohanan of their first encounter, when he leapt into the river after seeing what appeared to be a beautiful woman. Moreover, his attempt to answer R. Yohanan's challenge and outsmart him with the response, "Your beauty should be for women," only further indicated his preoccupation with outward appearances—even at the expense of misinterpreting reality.¹⁸

R. Yohanan, who was wise enough to discern the potential hidden in the bandit, expected that Resh Lakish would, over time, learn to look beyond a thing's exterior. This is why Resh Lakish's position in the halachic argument disappoints his teacher tremendously: It indicates that he has not really become a baal tshuva. Even though the former bandit has righted his deviant behavior and left his criminal career behind, his basic outlook remains unchanged. Resh Lakish's biography, then, recasts the technical halachic discussion as a tense clash of worldviews. In making an implicit analogy between a metal instrument that undergoes various alterations during its production and a man who undertakes the long process of moral and religious transformation, the argument touches directly on the issue of repentance.¹⁹

From this perspective, R. Yohanan's halachic position hints that the purification of ore by fire may be likened to the process of personal transformation. In the same way that metal loses its impurities by being exposed to fire, the baal tshuva rids himself of the corruptions of his sinful past. And just as purified metal retains its core material, the baal tshuva retains the essence of his personality. In contrast to Father Paphnutius, who shut up the prostitute Thaïs in a cell, R. Yohanan does not demand that Resh Lakish suppress his nature. He does, however, expect him to change his behavior dramatically. He looked favorably upon Resh Lakish's power ("Your *strength* should be for the Tora"), but he deplored its use in the service of crime. R. Yohanan's *beit midrash* welcomes courage but insists that brutishness be checked at the door.

Conversely, Resh Lakish does not see repentance as a "rebirth" or a return to a former, "purer" state of being. In his view, repentance is a linear process. The person who undergoes a transformation cannot erase his past; rather, he keeps a part of his previous self and makes positive use of it in his new life. Knowledge and habits that once served evil purposes can be channeled into the fulfillment of good ones. While R. Yohanan wishes to preserve only the original human potential—the "raw matter"—of the baal tshuva, Resh Lakish attributes great importance to his biography, even if it is an unsavory one. According to Resh Lakish, just like a metal object, man is

perfected through the “polishing” of the sinning self, not through the smelting away of its accumulated impurities.

In truth, the seeds of this dispute can be seen in the initial encounter between Resh Lakish and R. Yohanan: After deciding to repent, Resh Lakish wishes to return to the opposite riverbank in order to retrieve his clothing and, it is implied, his weaponry. R. Yohanan prevents him from doing so, however, forcing him instead to emerge from the river as naked as the day he was born, a “new man.”²⁰ Resh Lakish wants to carry his biography with him, but R. Yohanan forbids it.

The same fundamental disagreement is reflected in another talmudic discussion involving Resh Lakish and R. Yohanan, one that deals explicitly with the issue of repentance:

R. Yohanan said: Great is tshuva, for it overrides a prohibition of the Tora, as it is said, “If a man put away his wife, and she go from him, and become another man’s, may he return unto her again? Will not that land be greatly polluted? But thou hast played the harlot with many lovers; and wouldst thou yet return to me? Saith the Lord...” (Jeremiah 3:1).

Resh Lakish said: Tshuva is great, for it turns one’s vices into virtues, as it is said, “And when the wicked turneth from his wickedness, and doeth that which is lawful and right, he shall live thereby!” (Ezekiel 33:19).²¹

R. Yohanan bases his understanding of tshuva on a quote from the prophet Jeremiah, who compared the Israelites to a woman who has left her husband (i.e., God) and given herself wantonly to others (i.e., to idolatry). Under Jewish law, if the woman were to return to her husband, he would be forbidden to take her back.²² Nonetheless, God promises to treat Israel benevolently if it repents. Here, too, a clean break with the past is presented as a necessary condition for successful tshuva: Once repented, God will ignore Israel’s past idolatry and recall only “thy favor, the devotion of thy youth, thy love as a bride, when thou didst go after me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown.”²³ In contrast to R. Yohanan, however, Resh

Lakish makes a statement that has become—for good reason—the most concise expression of the Jewish approach to repentance: “Tshuva is great, for it turns one’s vices into virtues.”

But how, exactly, do vices become virtues? Our story holds the answer to this question as well. The death of Resh Lakish stirs something in R. Yohanan and forces him to realize what he has lost with the passing of his friend. As he grieves, his students attempt to console him by sending him a new study companion, R. Elazar ben Padat. Alas, the new partner is a conventional scholar, a traditionalist. He is not an independent thinker, as was Resh Lakish. It thus becomes clear that the well-intended salve only adds to the rabbi’s suffering: After years of studying with Resh Lakish, R. Yohanan has been exposed to an entirely different approach to learning and to life. Now, for the first time, he grasps how much his late friend’s criminal past had contributed to the vibrancy of his Tora study.

Indeed, as a rogue in his early life, Resh Lakish had become accustomed to resistance—to society, to law, and to custom. The bandit, after all, is an outsider. He resides beyond the boundaries of society, and from the haven of the wilds he taunts it. He forces society to defend and fortify itself and, in so doing, to progress. In a world without struggle, society stagnates. Although R. Yohanan did not recognize it at the time, Resh Lakish had taught him the value of opposition to the established order. Studying with R. Elazar ben Padat, R. Yohanan feels the onset of intellectual atrophy. His learning cannot advance with a partner who answers his insights and assertions with complacent nodding.²⁴ Only too late does R. Yohanan realize the vital role Resh Lakish had played in his life. For when the bandit entered the beit midrash, he may have abandoned his weapons, but he held on to his skill for wielding them, turning them into an intellectual virtue. Every last one of R. Yohanan’s halachic rulings met with Resh Lakish’s counterattack. As such, the need to defend his opinions sharpened and

deepened R. Yohanan's thought. Now, as he recognizes what was lost, he is stricken with terrible sorrow; unable to bring his scorned friend back to life, he descends into madness and dies.

The tragic tale of R. Yohanan and Resh Lakish, just like the hopeful tale of the prostitute and the yeshiva student, exemplifies a fundamental principle of the Jewish concept of redemption. A person who has repented of his crimes, say the sages, should not deny his past; indeed, he belittles himself by doing so. For one's sins are not manifestations of true evil, demanding expurgation. Rather, they are distortions that may be righted. Through repentance and self-improvement, the impulses, tendencies, and habits that once served evil ends may become the handmaidens of virtue. The forces of decay may give birth to life. The seeds that sprouted in the shadows may, in the light, come to bear fruit.

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Notes

1. Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, trans. Charles Lee Fahnestock and Norman Macafee (New York: Signet Classics, 1987), p. 120.

2. Hugo, *Les Misérables*, p. 279.

3. Yoma 86b.

4. This expression—a pagan oath—refers to the goddess identified as Isis in Egyptian culture and Aphrodite in Greek. See Saul Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine: Studies in the Life and Manners of Jewish Palestine in the II-IV Centuries C.E.* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1942), pp. 140-141.

5. Sifre Numbers, sec. 215. A parallel story appears in Menahot 44a. Many commentators have dealt with this story, each one helping to illuminate its various aspects. See Eliezer Berkovits, "A Jewish Sexual Ethics," in *Crisis and Faith* (New York: Sanhedrin, 1976), pp. 48-92; Warren Zev Harvey, "The Pupil, the Harlot, and the Fringe Benefits," *Prooftexts* 6 (1986), pp. 259-264; Alon Goshen-Gottstein, "The Tzitzit Commandment, the Prostitute, and the Homiletical Tale," in Tzvi Groner and Marc Hirshman, eds., *Rabbinic Thought: Proceedings of the First Conference on "Mahshevet Hazal"* (Haifa: University of Haifa, 1989), pp. 45-58 [Hebrew]; Admiel Kosman, *Women's Tractate: Wisdom, Love, Loyalty, Passion, Beauty, Sex, Sanctity* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2005), pp. 141-146 [Hebrew]; Simcha Fishbane, "'Go and Enjoy Your Acquisition'—The Prostitute in the Babylonian Talmud," in Jacob Neusner, ed., *Approaches to Ancient Judaism* (New Series), vol. 13 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1998), pp. 71-90; Ido Hevroni, "The Spiritual Flesh: On Sexuality and Spirituality in the Stories of the Sages," *A Collection of Articles Following the Conference on "Spirituality in the Sages' World"* (Beit Morasha College, forthcoming) [Hebrew].

6. Although the packing of the bedclothes is mentioned explicitly only in the parallel talmudic story, it can be inferred in the Sifre version quoted here, given that by the end of the story, they reappear.

7. Deuteronomy 23:19: "Thou shalt not bring the hire of a prostitute, or the price of a dog, into the house of the Lord thy God for any vow."

8. Benedicta Ward, *Harlots of the Desert: A Study of Repentance in Early Monastic Sources* (Oxford: A.R. Mowbray, 1987), pp. 83-84. This study includes other stories of Christian prostitutes and saints. See also Aviad Kleinberg, *Brother Ginepro's Leg of Pork* (Tel Aviv: Zmora-Bitan, 2000), pp. 442-463 [Hebrew]. My thanks to Professor Kleinberg, who read the sections of this article that relate to his field and shared his comments with me.

9. Ward, *Harlots of the Desert*, pp. 76-79.

10. A similar story is told of Maria, another prostitute and the niece of Saint Abraham. Maria divests herself of her property at her savior's command, not out of her own inclination to do so: "[Maria] said to him: 'I have this small amount of gold and these clothes, what do you want me to do with them?' And Abraham said, 'Leave it all here, Maria, for it came from evil.'" Ward, *Harlots of the Desert*, p. 99. See also Kleinberg, *Brother Ginepro's Leg of Pork*, pp. 449-450.

11. Ward, *Harlots of the Desert*, p. 84.

12. *Tannaitic*, i.e., related to the *tannaim*, the sages from the time of the Mishna.

13. Bava Metzia 84a, MS Hamburg 165. This story has elicited many interpretations. See, for example, Yona Frenkel, *Midrash and Agada* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1981), pp. 74-78 [Hebrew]; Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal*

Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1995), pp. 221-225; Admiel Kosman, *Men's Tractate* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2002), pp. 34-51 [Hebrew]; Ruth Calderon, *The Market, the Home, the Heart* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2001), pp. 27-40 [Hebrew]; Yehuda Libes, "Eros and Anti-Eros on the Jordan," in Shahar Arazi, Michal Fachler, Baruch Kahana, eds., *Life as a Midrash: Perspectives in Jewish Psychology* (Tel Aviv: Miskal, 2004), pp. 157-162 [Hebrew]. Not one of those who dealt with this story, however, investigated the meaning of the halachic disagreement that constitutes the centerpiece of the narrative.

14. As understood from the continuation of the story. Other sources claim his occupation to be that of a gladiator. See, for instance, Gitin 47a.

15. Jeremiah 49:11.

16. Genesis 27:40. For this idea I thank Hanna Braunschvig.

17. The Mishna states the following: "When is a sword susceptible to uncleanness? So soon as it is smoothed. And a knife? So soon as it is whetted." Mishna Kelim 14:4. Maimonides ruled the same way. See Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah: The Code of Maimonides*, book 10, trans. Herbert Danby (New Haven: Yale, 1982), Laws of Utensils 8:2, p. 418. Indeed, the refinement of metal in a furnace is perceived as the completion of the utensil itself, but only in the case of ceramic dishes, not in that of metal instruments. See Mishna Kelim 4:4. R. Yohanan is therefore presenting an extreme position, one that contradicts the ruling opinion in such matters. Interestingly, in most cases of a disagreement between Resh Lakish and R. Yohanan, the halacha accepts R. Yohanan's opinion. This fact strengthens the hypothesis that R. Yohanan's words in this story bear a symbolic meaning that goes beyond the legal argument under discussion.

It is also worth noting that the ruling of the Mishna seems not to match Resh Lakish's opinion with respect to "scrubbing," which, according to the sages, means "polishing," as the completion of the utensil, as opposed to "smoothing" or "whetting." See, for instance, Leviticus Rabba 1:14 and Pesikta de Rav Kahana 12:18. This is also the opinion of the *Ein Mishpat*, which refers to the ruling of Maimonides and notes: "Not as R. Yohanan and not as R. Lakish." See *Ein Mishpat* on Bava Metzia 84a. However, in his interpretation of the Mishna, Maimonides explains that the act of "smoothing" that the Mishna refers to is actually a "polishing" and not a scraping of the metal, as is commonly understood nowadays: "From when it is smooth—from when it is spread with oil following the polishing, as it is commonly done—to a sword." Moses Maimonides, *Commentary on the Mishna*, Kelim 14:4.

My thanks to Dr. Guy Stiebel, who assisted me in understanding the process of reinforcing metal instruments in the historical period under discussion.

18. Ironically, R. Yohanan *did* use his good looks "for women"—but not in the way Resh Lakish means. As it is said a few lines earlier in the same source,

“R. Yohanan used to go and sit at the gates of the *mikveh* [the Jewish ritual bath]. ‘When the daughters of Israel ascend from the bath,’ said he, ‘let them look upon me, that they may bear sons as beautiful and as learned as I.’ Said the rabbis to him: ‘Do you not fear an evil eye?’ ‘I am of the seed of Joseph,’ he replied, ‘against whom an evil eye is powerless.’” Bava Metzia 84a. This description of R. Yohanan’s strange behavior exemplifies his approach, which seeks out the hidden essence of things irrespective of any physical, perceivable aspect, such as other people’s opinions, cultural perceptions, and even tangible reality. The sages express their doubts about R. Yohanan’s behavior, but he appears to be undaunted by their gossip.

19. A comparison of the process of manufacturing instruments and purifying them to the process of human repentance can be found in the writings of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, specifically *Ein Aya*, vol. 3 (Jerusalem: The Institute in Memory of Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook, 1995), ch. 1, pp. 47-48 [Hebrew].

20. The explanation according to which Resh Lakish does not return to get his clothes because of R. Yohanan’s objection is based on the version of the story as it appears in MS Hamburg 165. The common interpretation of this tale—which is written in Aramaic—is that Resh Lakish was unable to return to the opposite riverbank because he was exhausted after receiving the “burden of the mitzvot.” This is based on the popular version of this story as it appears in the sixteenth-century Vilna printing of the Talmud, which reads *ba’ei lemihadar la’atuyei manei vela matzei hadar*. In the MS Hamburg version, it appears as *ba’ei lemihadar la’atuyei manei vela amatzieh*,” which is easily translated as “he would not allow him,” i.e., Resh Lakish did not return to get his clothes because R. Yohanan refused to give him permission to do so, not because Resh Lakish was too weary. My thanks to Professor Michael Sokoloff, who helped me to verify this reading.

21. Yoma 86b.

22. See Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

23. Jeremiah 2:2. R. Yohanan, incidentally, treats his sister in precisely the same manner: Instead of taking into consideration her present state (she is a wife and a mother), he wishes to erase Resh Lakish from her life and restore their previous relationship, in which she was under his fraternal protection.

24. On the perception of struggle as a necessary part of building the exegetical structure of the Babylonian Talmud, see Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, “The Thematization of Dialects in Bavli Aggadah,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 54:1 (Spring 2003), pp. 71-84.