

Story 1993 (1992 Tape 9)

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North Cyprus Turkish
Republic

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A Rabbi's¹ Give and Take

One day a middle-aged man named Karagöz died quite suddenly. He had for a long time been such a mean man that the family could not find a hoca² willing to conduct his funeral service. Finally a rabbi accepted the responsibility for leading the burial service.

In the funeral procession to the cemetery the rabbi walked before the coffin³ and the mother of the corpse walked behind it. The

¹Outside the major cities there are relatively few Jews in Turkey. As a result, only a small percentage of Turks—even among the educated class—know the word ḥahmam the proper Turkish term with which to designate rabbi. As in this tale, a rabbi is usually referred to as a Jewish priest.

²A hoca is a preacher and the religious leader of a Muslim community in Turkey. In pre-Republican times the hoca was also the community teacher. Separation of “church” and state in the Republic required that teachers be people of secular rather than religious training.

³The word coffin in this context requires some explanation. It may, as in Western countries, refer to a box in which a corpse is buried. In many cases, especially in rural areas, coffin refers to a large wooden box with no top but with a long wooden handle projecting from each corner. (The handles have earned it the epithet “Four-Armed One.”) It is a community “coffin” stored behind the mosque and used to carry corpses from the mosque to the cemetery. Traditionally Turks have been buried solely in cloth shrouds.

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mother was crying and saying, “Oh, my dear son, you died before you were able to recover all of the money you had loaned to several people! One person and another person owed you this much money and that much money. Who is now going to collect those sums of money from the people indebted to him?”

“I am! I am!” said the rabbi.

The woman then repeated her concern. “Who will now collect these different sums owed to you?”

“I shall! I shall!” said the rabbi.

As the procession moved on, Karagöz’s mother cried out with another concern. “Oh, my dear son, who now will pay whatever debts you yourself have left outstanding?”⁴

⁴Implicit in the mother’s concern here are the Muslim religious concepts of haram and helal. That which is helal is that which is permissible according to canonical law. That which is haram is forbidden. There is no obligation or restriction or penalty for doing or taking whatever is helal, but there will be a penalty on Judgment Day for doing or taking what is forbidden. To accept something from a donor is helal; to take it or steal it is haram. To do anything morally or religiously improper is haram. Dying or endangered people often declare helal anything they have given to or done for another person, so that that person will not go to Judgment indebted to another (which is haram unless declared helal by the benefactor).

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When the rabbi heard this, he said, “Defrocked⁵ Perez⁶ has no money! Defrocked Perez has no money!”

He was just like our government: always willing to collect money but never willing to give any.

⁵The word that the narrator uses here is aforoz, which refers to excommunication or banishment for religious reasons.

⁶Perez is not an unlikely name for a Turkish Jew. Most Jews in Turkey are Sephardim whose ancestors were exiled from Spain in 1492. These Sephardim in Istanbul and Izmir still speak 15th-century Spanish, publish two newspapers in that language, and sometimes retain Hispanic names.