How the 100th Murder Differed from the First 99

I believe that it was my grandfather who told me this story. Apparently he thought that it would provide a good lesson for me. The nature of that lesson will become clear as the story progresses.

Once there was a man who had worked for years at a variety of jobs, but in none of these occupations was he at all successful. In despair, he finally decided to gather a group of unsuccessful men like himself and form a band of outlaws. They built a stronghold on the side of a nearby mountain, and from there they carried on their criminal activities. They would go into local towns and force people they met on the streets to give up their rings, earrings, bracelets, necklaces, and other valuables. On other occasions they would invade pastures and steal sheep, goats, and other livestock. As robbers they were very successful, but their thefts were often carried out with violence. They did not hesitate to kill any victims who resisted them.
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By the time they had killed 99 of their victims, the leader of these outlaws began to have some second thoughts about this means of livelihood. The more he thought about his wicked behavior, the more he regretted that he had ever become involved in banditry. He said to himself, "I wish now that I had never harmed people. It would have been better if I had remained poor instead of becoming responsible for the murder of 99 innocent people." He continued to criticize himself and to lament his guilt until he became half mad. How could he ever be forgiven for his sins? Before separating from the band of outlaws, he decided to seek advice from a certain hoca who was known to be a very wise man.

He went to the village where that famous hoca lived and told the hoca of his personal difficulty. He said, "My hoca, I regret the many evil things I have done to other people. From some I took gold and jewels; from others I stole livestock. I stole many other things too--sometimes

1 A hoca is the preacher and religious leader of a Muslim community. In the Ottoman era hocas were also teachers, for then education was the responsibility of the clergy. Although teachers now have secular training, they are still sometimes called Hoca.
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even the çariks\(^2\) worn by my victims. But worst of all, I was also involved in the deaths of 99 people. Is it possible that Allah could forgive me for such terrible sins? I regret all of the evil things which I have done, but that regret is not enough. Is there anything that I can do now in my old age which might lead Allah to forgive me? **Hoca, please tell me what I should do.**

The hoca thought and thought about this matter. He knew that it was only Allah who could decide whether or not anyone's offenses could be forgiven. But he finally decided to make a suggestion to the former outlaw. "Listen, my brother. Buy a field at a crossroad where four ways meet. After bringing water to that field, plant there vegetables and fruit trees. Give all of the crops you produce in that field to travelers who pass through that

\(^2\)Çariks were the footwear of rural Turks until the middle of the 20th century. The çarık is a sandal with a turned-up toe. It is made of camel skin or donkey skin. Initially a pair of çariks are identical, not one for the right foot and the other for the left. To fit them to one's feet, one must soak them in water for some time. After putting on very heavy socks, the owner then must tie the wet çariks upon his or her feet. The çariks must not be taken off or even untied until they are completely dried, at which time one fits exactly the left foot and the other fits exactly the right foot. Most rural Turks now wear ordinary shoes, but in the interim between çariks and shoes, many peasants wore shoes made from the recycled rubber of worn-out automobile tires. The melted rubber was poured into left-foot and right-foot molds.
intersection. Spend all the rest of your life helping other people in this way. If the good things you do can balance the bad things you have previously done, then Allah may forgive you when you leave this world. Even if, on Judgment Day, Allah should say, 'Don't even bring that man before Me,' the prayers for you uttered by people you have fed may influence Allah favorably."

"All right, my hocası. I shall do what you have recommended. But how shall I know whether or not my work will earn me forgiveness?"

This was a difficult question for the hocası to try to answer. How could he respond to such a question? He was concerned about the welfare of this man, and he was trying to find a means of helping him. But what could the hocası say? After thinking for several minutes, he said to the former outlaw, "Find a bare and dry pole and plant it too among the vegetables and fruit trees that you grow. If that dry pole should begin to produce green leaves, you can then be sure that your sins will be forgiven."

Determined to follow the hocası's advice, the former outlaw went to the mountain stronghold to bid farewell to his former companions. He said, "I am going to change my way of life. I regret deeply many of the things I have
done in the past. Upon the advice of a very wise hoca, I am going to lead a different kind of life in my old age. Farewell!"

He then went and bought a field at a crossroad where four ways met. He hired several men to help him plant every kind of vegetable and every kind of fruit tree known to mankind. He was surprised to discover how plentifully his vegetables grew, and he was also surprised that his fruit trees began to bear fruit in fewer years than are generally required. The hoca had told him not to let a single traveler pass his garden without eating some of the produce from it. Because a steady flow of travelers passed a four-way crossroad, the former outlaw insisted on providing food for hundreds and hundreds of people over the next few years. He served these passersby whether it was day or night when they came along. They all thanked him and praised him for his generosity.

As his hard work and charity to strangers continued, the former outlaw went every day to examine the dry pole he had planted. For years he watched in vain for some green leaf or some blossom to appear on that pole. But he did not see the slightest evidence of any such growth.
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He was depressed by the fact that his years of serving food to travelers had not been rewarded by the sight of some greenery on that dry pole. But he continued to serve faithfully, hoping all the time that he might yet be forgiven for his sins.

One day while he was working in his field, he saw a horseman coming along one of the four roads. Running out into the middle of the road, the gardener forced the rider to halt there. He said to the stranger, "Brother, enter my garden and enjoy some of my food. Drink a glass of cold water and eat some fruit and vegetables before you continue on your journey."

"No! I am in a hurry. I must continue traveling at once.

The gardener then explained, "I was once an outlaw, and while I was an outlaw I did this and that evil thing. After a while, however, I regretted much that I had done, and, seeking forgiveness for my sins, I went to a wise hoca for advice. He advised me to give some food to every single person who came through this intersection. So you must eat something from my garden."

But the rider refused to spend any time there, no
matters how hard the gardener tried to persuade him to stop long enough to eat something. The former outlaw felt compelled to force every passing traveler to eat something, for he had pledged to do so. So great was the haste of the rider that he refused to pay any attention to the gardener's words. This angered the gardener, who began shouting, "Why can't you stop for just another minute?" When the traveler ignored him and rode off, the gardener grew even angrier. He rushed home, grabbed his gun, mounted his own horse, and rode off in pursuit of the fleeing traveler. When he overtook that traveler, the former outlaw said, "I have already killed 99 people. If Allah wants me to go to hell, then it does not matter if I make that number 100." He therefore shot and killed the unknown traveler.

The gardener now grew sad as he thought again of his situation. He had worked for years serving travelers and trying to please them, but he would receive no reward for all of his efforts. He had killed another man, an act which would eliminate any possible chance of his going to heaven. Despite his long labors, there had never appeared any sign of greenness on the dry pole he had planted, and now
there never would be any sign. With such thoughts passing through his mind, he rode slowly back to his property. There he dismounted and returned his horse to its stable. He decided to walk around his property just one more time before he left it and moved elsewhere. But suddenly there came into his view something startling, so startling, in fact, that he could not trust his eyesight. The dry pole which had remained barren for so many years was now covered with leaves. He was so astonished that he could not believe what he saw. He said to himself, "My years of work produced not a single leaf, but now, just after I committed my 100th murder, foliage bursts forth at last. I cannot understand this.

Unable to solve this mystery, he decided to return to the wise hocca for an explanation. "My hocca," he said, "I followed your advice and fed travelers for years. To a few of them I even loaned money. But the dry pole I planted never produced any green leaves as a sign of Allah's approval. Today I stopped a traveler and tried to compel him to eat some of my fruits and vegetables, but he refused to touch any of the food I offered. This angered me, and I pursued him on horseback. I thought, 'If Allah intended to send me to hell for 99 murders,
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committing one more murder will not make much difference. Therefore I shot and killed that ungrateful traveler. But when I returned to my garden, I found that the formerly barren pole was covered with leaves. I was amazed and confused. How could this happen after I had committed one more murder? Can you explain this to me?"

The hoc'a replied, "I was provided with information about that rude man. That rider was coming from such and such village, and he was going to so and so village. When he arrived at his destination, he was going to stir up much trouble. He had a practice of talking about people behind their backs, often making false accusations against them. By doing this, he turned people against each other, causing them to fight and often kill each other. The conflicts that he caused sometimes spread to other people. If he had reached his destination, he might have caused 100 or even 1,000 deaths. Allah made the barren pole leaf out because you saved the lives of all those people by killing that evil man. That is the explanation."

The former outlaw was happy as he left the home of the hoc'a. He returned to his garden and renewed his service to travelers who passed that way. He also continued
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to pray to Allah for forgiveness. Later travelers found it impossible to pass his property without first having eaten some of the food that grew there.