

Story 2097 (1988 Tape 16)

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Nasreddin Hoca,¹ Tamerlane,² and
the One-Legged Goose

As the army of Tamerlane swept westward through Turkey, there were many rumors about the invaders. One rumor concerned the bloodthirstiness of his soldiers. Another rumor claimed that when Tamerlane conquered Sivas, he had ordered that the city be entirely destroyed and that all of its inhabitants should be slaughtered.³

As the invaders approached Akşehir, the inhabitants of that city and all the villages around it began to

¹A hoca is the preacher and religious leader of a community. In the pre-Republican era the hoca was also the community's teacher, for education was then the responsibility of the clergy. Separation of "church" and state in the Republic required that teachers be people with secular rather than religious training. Nasreddin Hoca belonged to the earlier period. For centuries he has been Turkey's most beloved comic folk character.

²A Turkic-Mongolian conqueror who invaded Asia Minor in the late 14th and early 15th centuries.

³While there seems no doubt that thousands were killed, on both sides, in the siege of Sivas, there is no hard evidence that all of the inhabitants of the city were slaughtered.

Story 2097

desert their homes and search for safer dwellings in the neighboring mountains. But there was one resident of Akşehir who expressed no fear at all. He said to the fleeing people, "What are you afraid of, my friends? If you are afraid of being killed by Tamerlane, that is just nonsense. You should not be frightened by him. He is also human, like the rest of us. You should not fear him unreasonably. I shall protect you against Tamerlane and his troops and prevent them from harming you." By saying this, Nasreddin Hoca was trying to lift the spirits of the depressed residents of Akşehir, but many of them continued to move elsewhere.

In fact, as they were leaving, some of them rebuked Nasreddin Hoca. They said, "Hoca, you do not know that man. Actually, he is not a human being but a beast. Have you not heard about how many people he slaughtered at Sivas and elsewhere?"

There were, however, others who had faith in the wisdom of Nasreddin Hoca. Many of these people promised to help him in his effort to protect the residents of Akşehir from Tamerlane and his troops. To several of these loyal supporters the Hoca said, "Erect a tent on

Story 2097

the shore of Akşehir Lake. Place in that tent a reading table, and upon that table put a copy of the Koran. I shall read certain passages from that sacred book which will help me to control Tamerlane and his forces and prevent them from doing any harm to the people of our city."

Hoca's request was fulfilled quickly by a group of men, some of whom were residents of the city and some of whom were farmers from surrounding villages. He moved into the tent and awaited the arrival of the invaders.

Tamerlane had heard a few things about Nasreddin Hoca, but he had no idea about when and where he might possibly meet him. When advanced troops reached the shore of Akşehir Lake, they observed a tent in which an old man was reading a book. Surprised by his indifference to their presence, the soldiers remained right there until their great khan himself should arrive and observe this unusual man.

When Tamerlane reached that point, he and a couple of his commanders walked right inside the tent. The conqueror said, "Hey, father, who are you?"

"I am Allah," responded Nasreddin Hoca.

Upon hearing this, the khan and his commanders began

Story 2097

questioning the Hoca. "If you are Allah, are you capable of performing this and that and other sorts of miracles?"

The response to all of these questions was, "Yes."

At that point Tamerlane said, "Well, then, since you are Allah, we are the guests of Allah while we are here. As our host, you have an obligation to provide us with some food here in your tent."

Nasreddin Hoca himself was as hungry as were his guests, but he had no food there with him. So he asked for a little time to cook the food that he intended to serve them. Quickly locating a few of the friends who had promised to help him, he sent them to their village to get a roasted goose and a large quantity of pilav.⁴

When those villagers returned with the roasted goose and a large container of pilav, the Hoca was very pleased. But by then he was so very hungry that he could not resist eating one leg of that goose before he served his guests. In order to hide the side of the goose from which the leg had been taken, he covered it with pilav.

The Hoca placed the food on the table and then called his guests to come and eat it. They had barely started

⁴A rice dish containing flecks of meat and often pine nuts. It is a staple of Turkish diet.

Story 2097

their meal when Tamerlane discovered that one leg of the goose was missing. He stared at Nasreddin Hoca and asked, "What happened to the other leg of this goose?"

Observing the stern look on Tamerlane's face, Hoca knew that he needed a clever answer. He said, great khan, in this part of the country geese have but a single leg." As he said this, he looked out and saw a couple of geese standing on the shore of Akşehir Lake. They were, of course, standing on one leg, as geese usually do. The Hoca added, "If you don't believe me, take a look at those geese over there on the shore of the lake."

The conqueror was then certain that this was really the clever Nasreddin Hoca whom he had heard about, and he immediately felt challenged to outwit his host. He decided to continue playing the game which the Hoca had started. He gazed at the geese for a moment, and then he ordered one of his men to take a stick and chase those geese. When that order was carried out, the geese used both their legs to run away.

Thinking that he had outsmarted Nasreddin Hoca and placed him in an embarrassing position, Tamerlane said, "Do you see how many legs those geese have?"

Story 2097

Knowing that his ruse would sooner or later be detected, the Hoca had prepared a rejoinder. He was known for making quick retorts to rescue himself from difficulties. He said, "You are right, my khan. But if I had taken a stick and chased you like that, you might not have fled on just two legs but on all four!"

Amused by this witty response, Tamerlane smiled and forgave the Hoca. This was an important first step toward Nasreddin Hoca's protection of the people of Akşehir from the powerful conqueror