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The Outcast & Other Tales

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THE OUTCAST & OTHER TALES

INCLUDING STORIES FROM
"THE BOOK OF DEEDS"

S.Y. AGNON

EDITED AND ANNOTATED BY
JEFFREY SAKS

The Toby Press

The Outcast & Other Tales
by S.Y. Agnon
Edited and Annotated by Jeffrey Saks
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Contents

The Outcast 1

Translated by Marganit Weinberger-Rotman

OTHER TALES

In the Forest and in the City 53

The Revelation of Elijah 64

Three Oaths 72

The Stars of Heaven 78

Leah's Eyes 80

The Angel of Death and the Shochet 82

The Etrog 96

Rothschild's Luck 104

The Ring, or An Endless Story 115

To the Galilee 119

Gershom no longer favored his books, and did not even look at them. Instead his lips mumbled blessings and supplications. One Sabbath eve, the *Hozzer* entered Gershom's room, took out the Song of Songs and began to interpret verses, words, letters, cantillation notes, and all the sacred and awesome secrets embedded in them. Thus he interpreted and elucidated, as the Maiden of Israel when she originally recited the Song of Songs in front of the Husband of her Youth, the Holy One, blessed be He.

The face of the east had turned red and the vault of Heaven, nearest to the Earth, was getting darker and darker, but Jewish houses were lit up with Sabbath candles. The *Hozzer* peered out and said, It is time to welcome the Sabbath, and he departed.

Gershom stood motionless, reviewing everything he had heard, and his exhilaration was so great that he wanted to cry. He leaned against the wall and did not budge for a while. Eventually, he shook himself and said, It is time to welcome the Sabbath. He wrenched himself from the wall and went to the synagogue.

When he got to the synagogue he found most of the congregants already at prayer, reciting the Song of Songs. Some were singing aloud, others whispered softly. Gershom picked up a prayer book and went to his seat. He opened his prayer book and then held his head between his hands for a moment. When he lifted his head, he began to recite the Song of Songs with tremendous fervor and with awesome power. Thus he continued to read until he reached the verse, "Draw me, we will run after thee," and when he reached the verse, "Draw me, we will run after Thee," his soul departed in purity. His lips were still whispering, "The King has brought me into His chambers." His soul departed while uttering the verse. Thus died Gershom, the grandson of Rabbi Avigdor, because Rabbi Avigdor struggled with Rabbi Uriel and quarreled with *Hasidim*.

Translated by Marganit Weinberger-Rotman

In the Forest and in the City

WHEN I WAS A BOY I SPENT MOST OF MY TIME IN THE FOREST. I was idle at that stage. I had thrown off the yoke of Torah and had not yet bent my shoulders to the yoke of earning a living, and was still supported by my father; so I was free to do what my heart desired.

In the rainy season, when the world was cold and the land wet and dirty and the sky covered by clouds, I lay on my bed and read a book, and went to the Society of Zion clubhouse, browsed the newspapers, and sat among friends listening to their conversation. I did the same on the days when the city was lying under snow, and everyone who had no need to go out to make a living stayed at home. As soon as the first sun of spring shone and the earth dried I left my town and went to the forest; and when the sun became strong in the heavens not a day passed when I was not in the forest. Every day from sunrise to sunset I used to sit among the grass in the shade of the trees, eat my bread, read the Prophets and Holy Writings, and contemplate all that the Holy One, blessed be He, had created there between heaven and earth.

Who could tell of all that my eyes saw and my ears heard among the trees in the forest? Heaven and earth, trees and grasses, truffles and mushrooms, buds and flowers, birds and butterflies going about busily from dawn to dusk adorning the world, some with many beautiful colors and others with sweet voices, at every hour becoming more lovely than before, like artisans expert in their work, who, the older they get

the more expert their work becomes. In addition there was the light between the sky and earth which seemed to be green when it was blue, and blue when it was green, and it stretched like threads of spun gold. Then the wind was added, which spread about on its own, and immediately all the created things joined with it, leaves and shrubs, birds and butterflies and even the waves and small ripples of the river flowed along with it. This river, which flowed along among forest trees and heaps of stones and vegetation, had green and deep darkness on its banks, and frogs on the banks croaked, joining with everything else in the forest which burst into song. Why do I remember those songs? Because of what the Sages said about the time when King David composed the Book of Psalms and his mind became exalted and he said, "Is there a creature in the world who can sing like me?" and a frog appeared and said to him, "Don't be so conceited because I can sing better than you." That is why I mentioned the songs.

I lay down in the forest and looked in front of me and did not disturb the work of the world, and did not say, Do this or that. I am a modest man, and I do not push myself into the affairs of others, especially the affairs of the universe, because one cannot interfere with the business of the universe, or disturb its work, and tell it to do what it does so well itself and does it much better than either you or I could do it.

I have already told you that there was a river there, and if its waters were clear I bathed in them. I used to stand up to my neck in the water, my two feet treading the earth under the water, and little fish and other kinds of water creatures hopped and rushed about there. My head was straight up above, and a breeze blew on my face, and the whole creation was joined to me. How? Water clung to me, and the earth on which I stood, the wind blowing on my face and the water creatures jumped around and the sun glowed on my head. When I saw the sun in full strength I did not dry myself on coming out but stood in it to cool off: and I said to myself, "See how a little creature like me can also enjoy the works of heaven." In order to enjoy it again I went in again and did not dry myself. But I will not repeat the words I had spoken because my skin had already turned pink from standing in the sun. If you are generous to someone greater than yourself, don't boast about it!

When I came out from bathing I stretched out on the soft grass and said to myself, "The Lord is good," and since things were so pleasant I repeated it twice and thrice, and at that moment there gathered around me myriads and myriads of ants which came to listen. Because they were low down and did not reach my lips, I stretched out my hands and took them and lifted them and put them on the palm of my hand and held them near my mouth and spoke to them as if we were equals, and I repeated my words and said, "The Lord's good."

Since they were humble in their own eyes and not brave enough to speak in my presence I nodded my head in their place, and said to myself that I had spoken fine words, and I was convinced that they agreed with me.

In fact, every day when the sun showed itself and the paths were nice and pleasant I left my parents' house and went to the forest and stayed there all day, and there has never been a time when I was happier than in those days. But father and mother were not pleased with it: father because I was away from Torah study and neglected the Study House, and mother because I did not eat at mealtimes and taste warm food. In spite of that they left me alone and did not stop me.

When the news came that Francisco had broken out of prison mother and father began to be alarmed that this murderer might be hiding out in the forest, and they asked me not to wander there alone. It was not good to meet a bandit in a forest because they made a joke of murder, especially since his friends had been killed and he had sworn vengeance.

The sun hung in the heavens and the fruit hung on the trees, and all the earth smiled, but the hearts of creatures were sad, as if a prison chain hung on their necks. Like the terror of a drawn sword the fear of Francisco was lying over the city, whether they were Jews or Gentiles, men or women, old or young they sweated and were sick because of Francisco, who had destroyed many people and murdered a mother of children and a bridegroom in front of his bride.

At nightfall the shutters were closed and the doors locked, and locks were added to locks, and people went to bed in fear that Francisco would come and stretch out his hand against them, for there was not a door or lock fit to resist him. In fact on the very night he broke out

of prison he entered by a chimney into the home of the judge who had condemned him to death, and he tapped him on the shoulder in a friendly way and said to him: "You should really take care of yourself and get a good night's sleep."

When days passed and nothing happened some of the men of the city remembered Francisco with something of secret admiration because his bold heart exempted him from being a common robber. They spoke of Francisco's courage in that he did not even fear the government. When many days passed his deeds were covered up and some of them turned to his defense. They said that the bridegroom who was killed was a policeman who was pursuing Francisco to kill him, but he got in first. As regards the woman whom he killed, it was the habit among murderers to kill on account of women. A tiny drop of pity the Holy One, blessed be He, puts in the hearts of His creatures to pity the cruel, or perhaps it is not pity but that the heart acquires a grudge against the universe in which there are so many evil things. In all cases, a man takes upon himself to be judge and find some excuse. However, one way or another their fear was not diminished and they were terrified of Francisco. So it was easy to understand the distress of my father and mother who saw their son wandering alone in a forest when a murderer was at large.

But I did not change my ways. I went on doing each day as I had done. Every day from break of dawn to nightfall I was in the forest of my city, the forest which God planted before the city was built to enslave the body and afflict the heart. I was alone in the forest and I never found anyone there except the foresters who cut down trees and came there on their business. The people of my city were afraid of Francisco and did not go out to the forest. Indeed, even before that they were not accustomed to go there. They were preoccupied with earning a living and did not know that there was a world outside markets and shops. So I found myself alone all day long in the forest.

Once when I was going as usual into the forest I recognized from the marks on the grass that someone had passed by, and I said to myself, "Perhaps Francisco is here" and I stopped and thought, "What shall I say to Francisco if he meets me?"

As I was thinking a Gentile appeared, a very old man who bowed low before me and gave me a long blessing as the aged do who are free

from other things. I returned his blessing and began to talk to him. I realized that he was one of the remaining serfs who had served their masters all their days, whom the state had freed from bondage, and now, very old, he walked in the forest to pass the time. I thought to myself, "This man has experienced much, I shall be kind and speak with him."

I asked him if it would rain today, and he bowed low again and said to me, "With your permission, honorable master, anything can happen, but I think that it will not rain today." I relied on him that it would not rain and stayed and talked with him. Seeing that I did not despise him, he began to talk about days past when the Emperor was a young man and all the world was youthful and people were happy, and no one had need to pursue a living but his master supplied him with necessities and food and drink and happiness. Then they were obliged to work. But now do you suppose they sit idle? "No! They work, my master, they work until they are skin and bones without flesh and weak, because no one eats enough to be satisfied. And if one does not eat enough the world is not happy, my master, and if the world is not happy all creatures are unpleasant, creatures are not pleasant, worthy master."

I saw that he grieved for days gone by, and I sought to talk to him of other things and said to him, "Are you not afraid to go alone in the forest?" and he said, "Whom should I fear, honorable master? There are no lions and leopards here, nor bears and wild beasts, so what should I fear?" I said to him, "Thieves, and robbers, and Francisco and his companions." The old man scratched his forehead and said, "From the days when Abel slew Cain, his brother, murderers have not ceased and yet we are alive."

Seeing that his conversation was agreeable to me he started to tell me all about Cain and Abel. He began with the Creation, how the Holy One, blessed be He, created His world and left Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and gave them all their needs. The serpent came and deceived Eve and brought death into the world, and He finished with two sons of Adam and Eve alone on the earth. By that time the earth was infinitely broader, wider and bigger than it is now. Sheep and cattle and pigs grew up from the ground like truffles and mushrooms, and every cow gave a thousand measures of milk as soon as she entered the world, and man took as many cows and pigs as he liked. If he wanted

ten he took ten, if a hundred he took a hundred, if a thousand he took a thousand. No one paid taxes on land or cattle, neither to king nor church. In spite of that the brothers could not dwell together in peace till Abel killed Cain, but surely Cain could have killed Abel. He who is destined to die dies, and he who is destined to live lives, and even if a sword passes over his neck yet he can wrap a kerchief round it as if to protect himself from cold.

After some days the old man appeared again with a covered pot in his hand, and the smell of a hot, meaty stew arose. He bowed low and greeted me, and since we had gone over all our concerns three or four days before I did not know what to say to him, so I asked him if it would rain that day. He looked at the sky and said, "With your permission, honorable master, anything is possible, but I do not think that rain will fall today." He bowed low before me, waved his hat to the ground, and went on his way. I relied on the old man's words, threw off my clothes and went into the river.

That day a great mistake was made. I had hardly put my head into the river when a river was poured on me from above, and I hardly got out of the river before the waters rose up to my neck for at that moment the sky burst and the heavens opened, and raging waters came down. The river was filled with water and I struggled to reach dry land, but that dry land was no longer dry and was flowing with water like a river, and not only that, but trees and grasses were streaming like fountains, some above the water and some below. I found my clothes soaked in mud and mire as if they had been kneaded into the ground and soaked in a swamp of all the waters on earth. I wrapped myself up and ran back to town, the violent water flowing on me from above and the waters on the earth trying to swallow me from below. My clothes slapped me like sea waves, my shoes took in water and let it out again. My whole being was like flowing water, and the wind and thunder and lightning were terrifying the sky, and waters from above joined those below, and spread and increased.

I reached home and threw my hat off, and stripped off my shoes and took off my clothes and hung them on a rope in the kitchen and went to bed, because my bones were shivering and my limbs were trembling. Night and day I lay in my bed waiting for my clothes to dry, and

they did not dry because sacks of water were hanging on the rope and streamed forth. Cold and depression came out of them, weakening my heart and all my limbs.

From then onwards the rains did not stop. Every night they came down without ceasing, the same in the evening, and the same in the morning. The sky was laden with thick clouds and the face of the sun was not seen, and if it appeared for a little while it stood among clouds like a wet sponge. In fact the heavens were so filled up with water, and the earth so wet and dirty, that the whole world was not fit to be looked at.

After two days my clothes began to dry a little and I got out of bed and cleaned them of the dirt and mud. The flies, which had vanished at the beginning of the days of rain returned, settling feebly on the rope and on the sides of the stove and on other things. A heavy vapor came up from the floor of the house. If I sat at home I wanted to go to the club, and if I went to the club I wanted to return home. In any case I did not leave the city. Father and mother were pleased with me, but I was not contented. Once or twice I went out to the forest but returned when halfway there. Depression and dampness ruled outside like the dampness and dullness of my clothes.

After some days the sky cleared and the earth dried and the flies came back and flew about, and even a bird was seen at the window. Everything opened out and improved, and the roads were better. One day I got up early in the morning and took books with me and went to the forest. Silent and dark stood the forest, since the days when I departed from it, it had changed its nature. Where was its joy, where its light? The trees in the forest were silent, and their darkness darkened the air between the branches.

I went into the forest and the earth was wet and loose, and the smell of mushrooms after the rain rose up from the ground. Lots of mushrooms sprouted there and filled all the forest, under every tree and bush, in the midst of the grass and herbs, and in every other place. Because the ground was wet and cold I did not take off my shoes and I did not lie on the grass, but walked about. Mushrooms and truffles, yellow and colored, sprouted and flowered, and worms spread on the face of the earth, wriggled and fled, wriggled and hid themselves in the ground. The Lord knows I never thought to do them harm!

While I was walking about a small man, strong, with long hair, jumped out in front of me and shouted, "What are you doing here?" I said, "I am walking in the forest." He looked at me in anger and said, "Walking in the forest? Indeed, indeed, walking in the forest!" I nodded my head and said, "I am taking a walk here." He bent his head on his shoulders and looked at me, and asked, "Are you not afraid?" I said to him, "Whom have I to fear? There are no lions and leopards here; there are no bears or other wild beasts here, so what should we fear?" He went on and asked, "Have you seen anyone here?" I told him that I had not seen anyone except a very, very old man several days before the rains. He stretched out his hand towards my book, and shouted, "What's that in your hand?" I said, "Do you mean the book in my hand? Holy Scripture." He raised his voice and shouted, "What for?" I said to him, "I read them." He gazed at me for a moment and said, "You read Holy Scripture?" I said to him, "When I go into the forest I take the Holy Writings with me." He stamped and said, "Get out!" As soon as I went he returned and asked me if I would like a drop of spirits, and I said, "I think a drop of spirits on a day like this would be good for the throat." He opened his belt and brought out a kind of curved flask with a wooden cover and said to me, "Drink, drink." I drank two or three drops and returned the flask to him. I thought in my mind that good manners required wishing him *LeChaim!*—to long life!—but did not know how to say it in his language, so I said to him, "To your health!" He asked me, "What did you whisper?" I said, "I did not whisper." He said, "Did not your lips move like the spell of an old witch?" I said to him, "I recited a blessing." He said, "What blessing?" I said to him, "Blessed art Thou, Lord our God, King of the universe, by Whose Word all things exist." He said, "Translate it," and I translated for him. He waited a little and scratched his forehead and said, "Perhaps, perhaps it is so." He repeated, "How did you bless?" I repeated the blessing in the local language. He said, "In your language how is the blessing?" I said the blessing to him in Hebrew. He went on scratching his forehead and said, "Perhaps, perhaps it is so. It is so perhaps," repeating the words, and I repeated the blessing. He said to me, "Not so, but in your own language." "*Shehakol, shehakol*" I repeated, speaking in the Holy Tongue, "that all things exist..."

He said, "Did you not say that there is no one here?" and I said, "No one is here." He said, "Don't tell anyone that you met me." I said to him, "I shall not tell." He said to me, "Swear," and I said, "Why should I swear? I don't even know who you are." He looked straight at me and went his way, and I went mine, and on the way I thought, "He is turning his head and looking at me," so I opened my book and read it so that if he turned his head to look at me he would see that I was not spying on him. In the end I could not control myself and I looked behind me, and did not see him again, as if the earth opened up and swallowed him up. It was likely that he went into the forest or into a hollow tree, for there were old trees in the forest which lightning had struck, and they dried and made a kind of room in which an average man could sit comfortably.

I thought in my heart, "What a strange man that is! His head sunk on his shoulders, his neck not visible, and his eyebrows dark and broad as a thick rope, his teeth square like broad boards, and his body like a barrel. And just as he was strange, so was his speech strange. I said the blessing to him and he said, '*Tshakel, Tshakel*,' and what he said he repeated, and added, 'Perhaps, perhaps it is so!' Quite amusing!"

After some days I stopped thinking about him: but, when I was reminded of him, his questionings, and his "Perhaps, perhaps" and "*Tshakel, Tshakel*" I did not laugh, and when I thought of them they were much less entertaining.

At that time the newspapers contained a lot about Francisco: things we knew about and things that we did not know about, and I was sitting in the club going through newspapers to compare reports with one another, and I lost interest in that Gentile.

Then one day I was going to the forest, and near the courthouse I saw a troop of police with their lances shining in their hands, and people were pushing and standing about, and I asked, "What has happened here?" And I heard that they had caught Francisco and they were bringing him in. I pushed into the crowd and I saw that they were leading in a man bound in chains of iron and he was going along quietly, as if taking a walk for pleasure and did not feel the chains, as if accustomed to them. The two police led him, one on the right and the other on the left, their faces drawn and their lips tight from fear and from courage. From courage that they had been able to bring in the murderer who

had spread fear through the whole town, from fear that he would escape again. In front of them marched one policeman with a drawn sword.

I got near to that bandit, and I saw that he was the Gentile with whom I had drunk from his flask. He looked at me and recognized me, and it was apparent that he had nothing against me, although I had not sworn to him he did not suspect me of revealing his hiding place to others. Then I was pushed back and he forward, and I never saw him again, except for his two eyes which remained hanging by themselves as if etched on the air, these two eyes of his which were joined on his forehead like one big eye. If that eye could be explained this would be the explanation, "Although I leave the world and all the world means nothing to me, I am grateful to you that you did not join those who sought my life."

On that day a pleasant comforting breeze spread over the city, the murderer was captured and there was no longer a fear of death. Suddenly other deaths were forgotten, except those caused by Francisco's hands.

The whole city divided into groups and sects to pass judgment on Francisco. If the Holy One, blessed be He, had not commanded one to pray and earn one's living, they would have stood and passed judgment all day long.

People who had feared to lift their voices above their moustaches, and did not care to busy themselves with anything except earning their living, became agitated and trembled, and shouted that Francisco deserved to be cut up into bits and fed to pigs. Others said, "No, that death was too good for a murderer." Yet others, the merciful, whose hearts turned at first to pity, became very cruel towards him: because the strength of man's imagination is small compared with its cruelty, and they were obliged to agree with the judgment of the judge.

Judgment on Francisco was fixed already, and after a few days he was led out to execution. Before they placed the rope round his neck the priest came to him and said, "Confess!" He neither paid attention nor did he confess. When they pressed him he pressed his lips and chirped like a bird, as if wanting to teach the spirit which was about to leave the body the language of winged creatures. The priest recoiled, and the hangman came to tie the noose round Francisco's neck: his neck was short; if the hangman had not been quick enough that neck would not

have held the rope, but he pulled it this way and that until he squeezed the breath out of Francisco's body.

At the moment when the breath left, a sort of sound came from Francisco's mouth, and the hangman bent his ear and heard that he said *Tshakel*. This sound was bandied about by many, some explaining it this way and others that way. But I explained it thus: there is no such word as *Tshakel*, just the blessing "That all things exist by His Word." This murderer justified his own death sentence, for all exists by the Word of the Holy One, blessed be He. When he heard these words first he doubted and said, "It may be, it may be." At the hour of death he found in them complete agreement.

Translated by J. Weinberg and H. Russell