

## The Carrot, the Egg, and the Cocoa

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Had you met him as a young adult, you never would have guessed that he'd become one of the leading rabbis of his generation. Had you met him a few decades later, you'd never even imagine that he had once earned his bread through violence and crime. But such was the life of Rabbi Shimon bar Lakish, better known by his nickname Resh Lakish.

According to tradition, Resh Lakish, who lived in the Roman-ruled Land of Israel during the 3rd century of the Common Era, started his Torah learning as a young boy. Probably around his teenage years, he rebelled against his family and his community and left his studies to become a gladiator. Instead of spending his time sharpening his mind, learning a trade, and starting a family, Shimon sharpened his sword and started to fight for sport and for his life.

Now gladiators tended not to have such a long lifespan, what with all the maiming and killing taking place, so Shimon left his career as a famous gladiator and began a new endeavor...as a thief and bandit. Lying in wait by the open roads between villages, Shimon would hope for easy prey to come along so he could take their valuables. If they were lucky, the travelers would escape alive.

One glorious day, as Shimon waited for his next opportunity, he noticed a beautiful woman bathing in the Jordan River. He was so taken by her looks that he leapt from his hiding spot and landed in the water right next to her....only instead, Shimon found himself standing next to Rabbi Yochanan, one of his childhood classmates. Turning to the interloper who had interrupted his bath with such an incredible feat of agility, Rabbi Yochanan exclaimed, "Your strength would be more appropriate for studying Torah!"

"And your beauty would be more appropriate for a woman!" retorted Shimon.

"Well, in that case," replied Rabbi Yochanan, "if you return to your study of Torah, I will give you my sister's hand in marriage." What a deal!

Shimon agreed, returned to the Beit Midrash, the House of Study, and applied the same diligence and precision that he had learned as a gladiator and bandit to his new endeavor. In time he became one of the most respected scholars of his time, even surpassing his teacher and friend Rabbi Yochanan. Resh Lakish was known for his insistence that issues be explored from every angle and for his thoughtful and thorough legal decisions. He was wise and logical and passionate.

If, by the time Resh Lakish reached prominence as a Torah scholar, anyone remembered that he had been a gladiator and a thief, no one would have mentioned it, but it seemed to be a non-issue. As the righteous and insightful Resh Lakish, it was as if Shimon the wicked and violent had never existed. ....Except that he had. And when Rabbi Yochanan, in a moment of frustration, commented on his friend's past, Resh Lakish's humiliation was so great that he fell ill and died.

Which part of Shimon/Resh Lakish was the real, authentic part of him? Should he ever get to shed his past and be treated only as a great sage? Did he even want to? What would he do with the memories of the life he had lived and had left behind? And what if he hadn't committed so many crimes but, instead, had just experienced years of difficulty and hardship that he didn't want hanging over his head? Would he feel differently about those years and how they fit into his later life?

These questions have been on my mind for a number of years, ever since I met Rabbi Mark Borovitz, the co-founder of Beit T'Shuvah, a Jewish addiction treatment and recovery center in Los Angeles. Mark became a rabbi almost two decades years ago after spending the first part of his adult life as a mobster, gangster, con-man, alcoholic, gambling addict, and thief. He spent years in and out of jail and, in the mid-1980s, served a two-year term in a state prison. It was there that he found strength, comfort, and, most important, a sense of innate self-worth as he explored Judaism.

I met Mark in my second year of rabbinical school when I had to explore a type of Jewish community that I had never experienced before. I attended a Shabbat service at Beit T'Shuvah and spoke to him for a few minutes before the service started. Mark is not shy about sharing his story. It is part of his biography on the Beit T'Shuvah website, articles have been written about his path, and he has even written a book about his journey from crime to religion, called *Holy Thief*.

Rather than seeing his past as a liability and trying to hide from it or hide it from the world, Rabbi Mark Borovitz has turned his experience into his asset. He writes and speaks about his process of *t'shuvah* (repentance and return), raises awareness of the prevalence and impact of addiction within the Jewish community, and shows how Jewish text and tradition—our understanding of *t'shuvah* in particular—supplement and complement addiction treatment and recovery. It took strength, courage, perseverance, and determination for Rabbi Mark to reach the point he's at today, and he uses the story of his past to draw out the same qualities in his congregation of recovering addicts. No skeletons in the closet for him; he airs his dirty laundry and then guides people as they learn how to clean theirs.

I firmly believe that the challenges we overcome and the misdeeds we learn from are the source of our greatest strengths. I have seen this again and again in our congregation of people who have experienced incredible difficulty and have come through with strength they never knew they had. In truth, each one of us goes through adversity of different kinds, some of our own making and some that come from being in the wrong place at the wrong time. And although those experiences do not have to define us, we cannot hide from them and pretend that they never happened. Instead we have to address those experiences and find ways to integrate what we've gone through into who we want to

be now and in the future. *Shalom*, wholeness and peace, comes from accepting our pasts, not suppressing them.

I have to pause for a moment to note that one of the joys and terrors of sermon-writing is that you don't always know what's going to come out. And sometimes conversations and events from the days and weeks before can strike an unexpected chord. It is, in fact, multiple stories in recent weeks of people struggling to integrate their pasts with their presents that prompted this sermon. I hope that by sharing some of the adversity I've experienced, I can, like Rabbi Mark Borovitz, help each of us realize the ways we can turn past difficulties and failings into strength and blessing.

I've mentioned before that, when I was in high school, my parents were not particularly thrilled with the idea of me becoming a rabbi. I spent years pretending that the rabbinate was off my radar so that I could take advantage of certain opportunities, like attending my first choice college and participating in youth group conventions and trips. Those years were rough because I was afraid to be my authentic self in all areas of my life. There were days when the disconnect between how I presented myself to my parents and how I felt inside made it difficult to breathe. It was an immense weight off my chest when I finally told my parents that I wanted to be a rabbi and had applied to rabbinical school.

I learned from that time how important authenticity and integrity are to me. (Remember how last week I invited you to join me in evaluating how we're doing in living out our highest values? These are some of mine.) What this means is that I measure how close I am to my right path by how much I feel like I live and act with integrity. What had been a weakness has since become a strength. Through this experience in high school and college, I also discovered my own resilience, determination, and commitment. Those are good traits to have in a back pocket, and they reminded me that I had the wherewithal to overcome other challenges, especially those that called my values into question.

These formative experiences are particularly useful for clarifying the values we feel compelled to uphold in order to feel whole. As challenging as those early troubles may have been for any of us, they can be a wealth of information about ourselves, especially if we reflect upon that adversity sooner rather than later. We can learn about our priorities, what prevents us from upholding them, and how to use them as a compass to guide us on the right path. That way, when we are faced with another round of difficulty, we know where we're headed—no matter how far off course we end up, we'll have guides to help us find the way back.

One of the blessings that came out of having an early experience of inauthenticity and finding my way back to integrity is that I had already practiced being resilient and staying true to myself. Practice is really helpful, so the next time things got tough, I already had an inner core of courage and confidence that I could draw upon to get me through. Weakness became strength.

And oh how I relied upon that strength the next time trouble brewed! This time in my marriage and subsequent divorce. The details of what happened are not particularly

important for us today, but suffice it to say that issues arose that caused me, once again, to question my integrity. Integrity—the trait I had committed myself to nourishing not three years prior. I won't say that it was only because of my earlier experience of inauthenticity that I was able to step back and see our problems for what they were, but I certainly drew strength and confidence from it. The tools and insight I had gained from that earlier hardship helped me when a new challenge arose.

There are times when I wish that things had been different, and I know that there are things that you also wish could be undone. I wish that we could shed the pain and the memories and pretend, like Resh Lakish, that none of it ever happened. But the pain and memories do not go away—not for me and probably not for you. Instead, we can all choose to turn the difficulties of our pasts into strength and blessing by acknowledging our struggles for what they were and how they have shaped us.

How have your experiences of adversity shaped you? What strength and blessing have you drawn from those experiences?

This summer, I had the opportunity to spend two weeks as faculty at Camp Harlam. One of the *middot*, the character traits, that we tried to strengthen among the campers was the *middah* of perseverance and resilience. We led a program for the entire camp focused around this idea, and started it by telling the story of a person in the old country, who suffered from great difficulty and made sure that everyone else knew how bad it was. After too long of dealing with someone who was so resistant to any suggestions of how to make life better, the community finally asked the rabbi for help. The rabbi invited the poor sufferer over for Shabbat dinner (please forgive me for talking about food on a fast day), and asked the sufferer to wait a moment until everything started cooking. The rabbi had three pots of water boiling on the stove. Into the first one went some carrots, into the second went some eggs, and into the third went some cocoa powder. They then went into the living room, sat down, and talked.

I could keep telling the story, but I have to interrupt it to paint the picture of telling it at camp. Before the program started, we had set up a fire pit with a grate over it and placed three giant pots on the grate. We had carrots, eggs, and cocoa powder ready to go, so that when we got to the part where the rabbi puts food in the pots, we could drop the ingredients into our own pots. The campers were captivated and strained to see what was going on inside the pots. And then we continued with the program as though we hadn't just left them with a huge cliff-hanger. Throughout the evening kids kept glancing over at the pots, wondering what was going to come out of them.

Well, our poor suffering person shared tale after tale of woe until, finally, the rabbi had to go back to the stove and finish preparing the Shabbat meal. As they walked back to the kitchen, the rabbi pointed to the pots and said, "Each of these pots represents a different type of person. The carrots are crisp and bright when all is good, but when they

get into hot water, they turn to mush. The eggs are delicate and soft when times are easy, but hot water turns them hard and unyielding. The cocoa, which is sweet but still has some bitterness—when it gets into hot water, it spreads its sweetness around and even loses its hint of bitterness. Which are you?”

Which are you—a carrot, an egg, cocoa powder? Which do you want to be?

If I might be so bold, I would say that Resh Lakish was a carrot. He appeared strong and even survived some rough times, but he lost all ability to hold himself together when reminded of his past. Our poor, woe-is-me sufferer was the egg who became inflexible and unyielding from struggle. Rabbi Mark Borovitz, however, strives to be the cocoa, taking his past and his difficulties and making them into something sweet that can bring sweetness to others as well. It is what I strive to do as well.

On Yom Kippur, when we are asked to confront our misdeeds, mistakes, and struggles from the past year, we may wish to ignore what we have done or experienced, especially that which took place long ago. We may want to get over or leave behind our past—after all, it’s old news. Or we may feel entitled to pity and attention because of what we have suffered. With both of these responses, the past risks our future. In the first case, our Resh Lakish carrot, the past lurks beneath the surface waiting for the right moment to undo all that we’ve worked for. In the latter case, the woe-is-me egg, the past overwhelms the future and prevents continued growth and blessing.

Instead, I hope we each are cocoa, spreading to everyone around us the strength and sweetness that we can derive from our trials and tribulations. What can we learn for our own benefit and for the benefit of others? How can we turn the hot water we’ve been in into something even better? From situations that have nothing inherently good in them, what blessings can we eke out?

To address these questions head on, to reflect on the sins and adversity of the past, is to turn a liability into an asset, to turn a curse into a blessing. May we find the courage, determination, and perseverance to turn all of our faults, misdeeds, and challenges into blessings of strength and sweetness.