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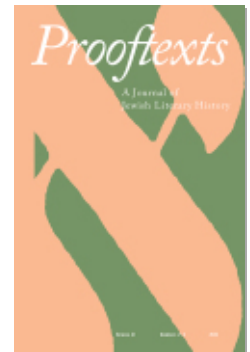
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Ovadiah the Hunchback

SHMU'EL YOSEF AGNON

Translated by Raymond P. Scheindlin

1.

Ovadiah the water carrier never berated heaven; he actually found something in his defect to be grateful for because, if he were like other people, would he have been able to become engaged to a girl—even one with a bad reputation? But he is a hunchback with no hope of marrying, and the Torah says, “It is not good for a man to be alone”;¹ now that he has found a bride, he has found something good.² And her bad reputation? People spread nasty gossip about a girl until she marries, but once she comes under the ḥuppah,³ she is considered a worthy woman in every respect. But Ovadiah was miserable because in his heart, he was aware that Shayne-Serel had not forgotten her old ways, that she still clings like wax to every boy in town, and that she even goes after them and shuts herself up with them and goes dancing with them. Someone even said to him, “Don’t break the glass at your wedding! Serele might miscarry from the shock.” One Friday night, Ovadiah went to the house where dances were held, for he said to himself, “Who’s to blame for her going with all the scum like a slutty servant girl?” Clearly, it is because he lets her do whatever she wants. Now that he is going to confront her, she will be ashamed of herself. He laid out his arguments in advance; he would say to her, “Shayne-Serel, darling, are these things right for you? Soon you’ll be going to the ḥuppah like any Jewish girl, and here you are dancing like a slutty servant girl?”⁴ Better for you to stay at home and pay attention to how your mistress does things, so that with luck you’ll learn to behave like a proper housewife.” On the way, he realized that he was not

wearing decent clothes. (Whenever he thought to buy himself a garment, he said, “Better to arrange for her clothing first; the girl comes before the boy,” and he gave her money.) If he would go in there, he would embarrass her. When he realized that he would cause her embarrassment, he retreated.

Nor on the following Sabbath could Ovadiah sit at ease. During the six days of the workweek, a man is so busy earning his bread that the blood spurts out from under his fingernails, but when the Sabbath comes, rest comes along with it, and when rest comes, thoughts also come. Ovadiah lies by the stove or he sits in the *bays medresh* and takes stock of his life. “For the moment, I’m living in a hole that isn’t my own, rented from someone else, but soon I will be making her my wife, and she and I will make a home of our own. For the moment, I’m a nobody, a nothing, and she is a low-class servant girl, but soon I will be conveying water in a wagon, I the master of a house and she the mistress.” As soon as a person acquires a bed, fleas jump on him; likewise, Ovadiah won a bride, and others, too, won her over. Ovadiah asked, “How long am I going to say nothing while they do whatever they want? If a person makes himself like dirt, everyone walks over him.” That very day, Ovadiah took up his crutch and went. Yet again, his heart hesitated: they are dressed up like royalty while he is just about naked in his tattered clothes, just about barefoot in his patched shoes; and his *kapote* makes him look like a clod. In the end, he kicked on the door and went in. Said Ovadiah, “What do I have to be ashamed of in front of these beggars?”

2.

When he first entered, Ovadiah remained clearheaded. The people in the house were busy with their dancing, and no one turned his head toward Ovadiah. This permitted him to settle himself. Ovadiah stood and watched. The house was full of young men and women, their faces glowing like burning coals, and they were dancing in couples, flying like lightning, roaring and rushing, while the lady of the house provided dance music and sang:

When the rebbe takes his snuff,
The rebbetzin blows her nose,

And girls must dance all by themselves,
If they haven't any beaux.

The house was full of people, but Ovadiah saw Shayne-Serel as soon as he entered because Shayne-Serel was so tall that she stood out among her peers. Ovadiah stood and stared at her beauty, but he did not approach her so as not to embarrass her. While he was standing there, he saw the schoolteacher's assistant, the man with whom he used to store his buckets. Ovadiah looked at him in surprise: A schoolteacher's assistant at a dance? At the same time, he felt important, like a man who comes to the big city and encounters a relative. When the dance ended, Ovadiah pushed himself forward and came up to Shayne-Serel. Shayne-Serel was still hovering above the ground like a string fluttering on a fiddle, her face concealed by a patterned kerchief that she was using to ease the heat, and she did not see Ovadiah until his foot touched hers and she started.

Ovadiah lowered his head and greeted her and leaned on his crutch and stood there catching the fragrance that wafted from the kerchief. Shayne-Serel brought her head out from under the kerchief and said in surprise, "Well, hello there!" Ovadiah was already sorry that he had come. If he could have slipped away, he would have slipped away. So what if she was dancing? She is not a married woman yet. But when he saw how brightly her cheeks were glowing, he had a rush of passion. He bent down and whispered to her, "Not right, Serele, as I'm a Jew!" Just then, the woman of the house waved a white cloth back and forth. The boys spit out the shells of the watermelon seeds that were in their mouths and came and stood before the girls, and each one asked a partner to dance. Ovadiah saw that there was not much time; he lowered his voice like a man pleading for his life and said, "Serele!" Shayne-Serel gave him a look as if to say "I've never seen this man in my life!" and she said, "Ovadiah, don't you want me to dance with them?" Ovadiah became uncharacteristically severe and said, "No, I can't stand it!" Shayne-Serel bent down toward Ovadiah and said, "In that case, *you* come and dance with me," turned her back, and went away.

When the boys saw that Shayne-Serel had booted him, they ganged up and made fun of him and knocked his crutch out from under his arm. He bent down and picked it up, but when he bent down he nearly collapsed and fell. They began

shouting at him from all sides, "Watch out, Ovadia, that you don't make a hole in the floor with your hump!"

The teacher's assistant came over to him and called out, "Welcome, Reb Halfman!" and he kept up an act of being amazed, as if it were something strange that a man like Ovadia should have a family name. He even patted him on his hump and said, "Would the gentleman perhaps like to dance?" One of the crowd picked this up and chanted, as if calling up a person to the Torah on Simḥat Torah: "Arise, bridegroom Ovadia, you are being honored with the honor of dancing!"⁵ Before long, most of the girls were standing beside Ovadia, surrounding him with their bare arms, dousing him with their fragrance, and dragging him this way and that, quarreling with one another, each of them saying, "Ovadia, come and dance with me!" Red Reuven put his face in front of his in a fury and cried, "Boys!," and immediately two youths came and pulled the crutch out of the hunchback's hand and thrust it under his legs, and they lifted him up high and sang a mocking song that they made up on the spot in Ovadia's honor:

Someone new
Has joined the party.
A great big hump
And a tiny body
Leaping here,
Leaping there!
Bim bam bam,

Bim bam bam.

He's a dancer,
He's a groom.
He'll go dancing
Very soon!
Leaping here,
Leaping there!
Bim bam bam,
Bim bam bam.

Perched on his crutch, Ovadiah seemed to be teetering in the air, and he was flailing with his hands and kicking with his feet and biting with his teeth and scratching with his nails until they put him down and gave him back his crutch. He held the crutch in both hands and leaned on it with all his weight. Red Reuven jumped up and grabbed the crutch out of Ovadiah's hands. His red eyebrows stood erect so that they were nearly sticking into Ovadiah's eyes, and there was such hostility in his face that Ovadiah was terrified, and he cried, "Jews, have pity on me! Don't do me harm!"⁶ Red took the crutch and put it on his knees to break it. But the crutch was solid, and his knee joints nearly cracked apart. The pain made his blood boil, and he was overcome with rage. He took the crutch and hurled it into the stove. The fire began to lick at it and burn it. Ovadiah waved wildly with his hands and flailed in space like someone drowning in the mighty waves. Then his feet tottered, and he fainted and fell to the floor like a dead man.

Ovadiah lay there for a while. The people who were near the spot where it happened edged away, and those who were farther edged closer. The lady of the house brought a bottle of vinegar to rub on the head of the "corpse." They rubbed his forehead and sprinkled him with "fainting drops."⁷ Shayne-Serel, who had broken away from her dancing partner, came and bent over Ovadiah. Ovadiah opened his eyes a little. So close she was to him, how close her body was to his body. The folds of her warm breasts touched his chest and he felt their warmth. His shoulders shrank as if he had touched a lantern that had just gone out and was still hot. His thoughts became intermittent and gradually vanished from his mind. People did things to him, and he looked at them as if whatever they were doing they were doing to someone else. After half an hour, some men came and brought him to the new hospital.

3.

Ovadiah did not want to go to the new hospital; they made him go. The whole way, he kept crying, "I'm really fine!" But when they took off his clothes and laid him on a bed, his limbs began to hurt as though his joints had burst and his bones had split apart. The fall that he had taken when he fainted was really a fall, and if they had not brought him to the hospital, his ailments would have been the end of him. Why did

Ovadiah not want to go into the hospital? Fear of being embalmed possessed him. People were saying that whenever someone dies in the modern hospitals, they come and embalm the body. This hospital was a modern one, and when people said this, the officers of the old community infirmary who had lost their positions nodded knowingly and thereby reinforced what people were saying.

Formerly, there had been a community infirmary; the place was available to people with even the most disgusting ailments,⁸ as well as to robbers who traveled from district to district and to incurable invalids, until the roof was falling in and the walls were tottering and the government came in and ordered it shut down. The building became a ruin. Whoever was building a house in the neighborhood took away the stones and columns, cut down the infirmary doors, took the decorative crowns and the engraved ornaments and the doorsill and the cornices; and then the great fire came along and burned down the rest, and nothing was left of the building but a pile of stones.

Then a woman who worked in the house of one of the town dignitaries fell sick. She lay in her master's house for weeks, and there was no telling how long her life would last. The dignitary consulted with the community leadership about building a hospital like what Jews have in other communities of their dispersion. People were found who got the work done, and they set up a kind of hospital for the poor. Any sick person who had a connection with a member of the hospital board found a bed and medicine there until he died. Once a day, the town doctor came to visit his patients, and two or three times a week, the functionaries of the burial society came to prepare the dead for burial, and people who were active in community affairs spent time there when they had nothing else to do and had no other obligations. Then the town doctor fell sick, and his younger colleague came in to work under him. This young man had intended to go and settle in the Land of Israel and to create a modern hospital there. He saw what bad shape the hospital was in and made whatever improvements he could, and when the old doctor died, they appointed him as his replacement. Once he had the appointment as the regular doctor, he introduced major new procedures until he made it like the modern hospitals. The old people were not happy with the new arrangements and left and were replaced by young people with intelligence and goodwill and money and the ability to get things done. In a short time, the hospital became a blessing to the town.

4.

They brought Ovadiah to the hospital. It was evening when they brought him in. The attendant bathed him in warm water and dressed him in a clean gown. Ovadiah was puzzled: Hadn't he bathed before the Sabbath? Hadn't he put on a shirt in honor of the Sabbath? When he went to put on his *talles koton*, the attendant said, "Wait until it can be washed," brought him into a special ward, laid him down on a made-up bed, and left. Ovadiah saw that he was lying there alone and said, "Oy! I'm going to have to lie here by myself all night!" He rummaged around in hope of finding a *humesh* or a Siddur but found none. He felt for his *payes*, and that reassured him.⁹

A nurse came in, set her glasses on her nose—her eyesight had been ruined by much studying before her examinations—looked at the chart above his bed, and since his name had not yet been entered on it, asked him his name. He told her his name, and she was amazed and said, "Obadiah! The name of a prophet! Do you know Obadiah?" He said, "Of course I know him. After all, we read his book as the *Haftore* of *parshes Vayyishlah!*"¹⁰ And although she was Protestant and did not know what he was talking about, she smiled at him and nodded. She went on and asked, "And what is your family name?" He told her his family name. She wrote down his first and last name on the chart, examined the room to see if it had everything necessary, said good-bye, and went out. Ovadiah turned over in the bed but was unable to sleep. He had already put the troubles of the day out of mind, but he was worried that the lady might have been mistaken about him. Tomorrow, when she realizes who he is, she will berate him. For she had looked at the chair, obviously in order to examine his clothes and from them to deduce what kind of person he is. But his pains were too much for his thoughts, and he fell asleep.

5.

He was still sleeping when the same nurse came in and greeted him and asked if he had had a pleasant sleep and if he had had a good dream, and while she was talking, she inserted a tube under his armpit to measure his temperature, and she took his hand to measure his pulse, and she wrote letters and symbols on his chart. Ovadiah realized that she was not holding anything against him, so he pointed to the tube

and asked, "What is this?" She said, "A thermometer." And because she spoke gently, but in a manner that brooked no objections, Ovadiah was ashamed to go on to ask, "And what is a thermometer?" So he put off his question for another time.

They got the patients out of their beds to clean the room before the arrival of the doctor. They carried out the urine and turned over the bedding and cleared away the dust and washed the floor. As a new patient who had not yet been seen by the doctor, Ovadiah was not moved from his bed. The other patients came over to him in their various garments. Some looked at him and turned away, some asked what was ailing him. They also told him what he needed to do in order to stay in the hospital even after he was well; they taught him how to pretend to be sick. Ovadiah wanted to ask why in the world that girl had tickled him with the glass tube and why she felt around his pulse and what she had written on the chart, and wasn't he in danger of being turned over to the government authorities? Suddenly, he thought of the doctor and began to worry that they might cut off his leg, and he stopped asking questions.

Patients who had permission to get up went and sat at the table in the vestibule, and a nurse was there who gave them breakfast. She did not give the same thing to everyone. To one she gave milk and to another she gave tea; to one she gave coffee and to another cocoa. It was the same with the bread: one got bread with butter, and another crackers and zwieback, all in accordance with the patient and his ailment. Some patients were given neither bread nor tea but a kind of green liquid to clear out their stomach and to loosen their bowels. The moment the nurse turned her back to them, they all began to trade: one who had gotten milk wanted coffee, and one who had gotten crackers wanted bread because he had sharp cheese that his relatives had smuggled in for him. When they finished eating, they returned to their beds. Ovadiah was brought into a ward with the other patients. Thank God! If they hadn't put him together with other patients, he would have died out of fear and boredom. How can you separate a Jewish person from his community? The patients lie stretched out on their beds, some of them wailing and groaning. But whoever has gotten a little better or whose ailment is not very severe does whatever his heart desires: one studies his own urine, another fusses with the bandage on his wound, and both of them try to divine what is on the day's menu.

6.

Ovadiah's wounds were not severe and did not amount to a true ailment. Ovadiah could have gotten up after two or three days and gone back to work. He had not been pampered as a child, and if he was injured, so what? Was he a lesser man for that? But when the nurse examined his urine, she found protein in it. She looked into the doctor's looking-instrument and saw that it contained clumps of blood and white blood cells. Ovadiah had caught cold and fallen ill with a kidney infection. When the doctor came to examine him, he found that his spine at the point of the lumbar vertebrae, above the sacrum, was swollen. The skin over his flesh was swollen, with fluid between the skin and the flesh. The doctor said to the nurses, "He has dropsy," and forbade him to get out of bed and ordered that he be given foods that are easy to digest, such as milk and rice and groats and soup and rolls and flour gravy without salt or spices. His face became taut and puffy with the appearance of glass. His eyelids were heavy and his vision hazy; his urine was cloudy and constantly changing. At first, it was more than half a liter per day with much sediment, and its specific gravity was more than 1,030, but Ovadiah did not feel sick.

Ovadiah lies on a clean bed like a prince, and they feed him the finest foods the world has to offer. Not a day goes by when they do not show him some kindness. They gave him a sort of bristle-thing for his teeth. And they gave him white powder for his teeth, and when he dips the bristle-thing in water and sprinkles some of that powder on it and rubs his teeth, immediately fresh air comes into his mouth and exits through his nostrils and enhances his breathing and brightens his eyes, and his teeth become whiter and whiter. And they gave him a kind of cream to smear on his hands, and once he began to use it, his skin became soft, and the wrinkles smoothed out, and his wounds began to disappear, and his skin became as smooth as the skin of an unborn calf. Sometimes the nurse goes into town and gives him her hand to say good-bye, and he actually feels her hand with nothing in between. If Shayne-Serel would see him in this condition, she wouldn't be ashamed of him. Every day, Ovadiah expects Shayne-Serel to come to visit him in his sickness. It would be so easy! What is the mere half-hour walk that separates them? Does she have to bring a gift? Anyway, it's not permitted to bring food in from outside. But if he had some item, he would show it to his neighbors and say, "Shayne-Serel gave

me this.” So every day, whenever visitors’ hour arrived, he would arrange his *payes* and smooth his beard and stretch out on his bed and wait for her to come. But Shayne-Serel did not come.

7.

Ovadiah lay in the hospital almost until Rosh Hashanah. By now, he is already getting out of bed once a day and going out to the hospital garden. He has been given a new crutch with a rubber tip at the bottom, and when he walks, he makes no noise. The doctor and the nurses are continuing to show kindness to him. But every good thing has its bad side: since the day he entered the hospital, he has heard no news of Shayne-Serel. Doesn’t she know where he is? Wasn’t she at the dance on that Sabbath of disaster? Didn’t she see that he was carried off to the hospital? Or maybe she’s sick, God forbid! Before complaining about her, better to find out whether she is well, but whom should he ask? Neither the patients in the hospital nor their visitors know her.

Ovadiah warmed his broken body in the sweet light of the sun. His tendons tighten and stretch, tighten and stretch, and he can turn in any direction he wishes. Even his hump no longer weighs down his back or pulls him down to the ground; it seems as though it had been cut off at the apex and part of it removed. You would think that he had nothing more to trouble him, but he was in fact troubled that Shayne-Serel didn’t visit. Not because he was so eager to see her but so that she would see him in his glory and then she might like him. But Ovadiah was not one to keep on sorrowing for long, and every sorrow comes with some consolation. Sooner or later, he will be leaving the hospital, and if she doesn’t come to him, he will go to her. The doctor had already patted him affectionately on the back and said “Today, Ovadiah, you’re a man!” and permitted him to go out near the town to try out his legs a bit. His strength was returning. Blessed is the Lord, day by day!¹¹

Sometimes Ovadiah would say to himself, “Fool that you are, why are you in such a hurry to leave the hospital? Are you concerned about your buckets? Your buckets are being kept for you in the teacher’s house. If it’s your money that you’re worried about, your money is invested at interest, and every day the interest increases alongside it; besides, your room and board are given you for free, and whereas you

used to grind your bones without ever earning enough for a decent meal, now you eat as much meat as you want; why, the foods you are eating now on the week-days, you didn't used to eat in your own house even on the Sabbath!" At this point, Ovadiah would muse: "What a wonder! At first, I resisted entering the hospital, and now it's hard for me to leave it!" Like a man who eats a lot before a fast because tomorrow he will be fasting, so Ovadiah would spend a lot of time lying on his bed, luxuriating in his blanket, eating everything they put before him, and greeting every day with love, knowing that tomorrow he might be leaving. When Ovadiah was lying on this clean bed and stretching himself out on these white linens and laying his head on a real pillow and covering himself with a real blanket, he nearly forgot that he was lame and foul with blemishes. He lay there like a rich man; like a woman who had just given birth, he lay there.

8.

"The jar drops down the well and finally breaks."¹² What must happen happens. Shayne-Serel's weighty body, her plump limbs, her lush flesh cast over her a sort of dullness. At night, after a heavy dinner, lying in her bed enveloped in pillows and blankets—how can the idle heart keep itself from impure thoughts? If the boys would keep their hands off her, she would dismiss her urges, but since they are stirring her urges, how can she resist them? Moreover, had the trouble come from the outside, she would have managed to resist it all, but with the trouble in the very house, who could resist it? Her mistress has a servant, Red Reuven by name, who clings to her like a scab. She has warned him over and over that if he touches her, she'll flay the skin off his face; but when he puts his hand on her breast, her breathing becomes so disordered that she cannot even put the words together to scold him. If the hunchback were here, he might save her from sin, but since he is not here, she is just an available housemaid. She has no appetite for the crude fellows, but they are impudents and she cannot stand up to them.

Who caused Red Reuven to get control of Shayne-Serel? Yehuda Yoel, the son of the household. Yehuda Yoel was devoted to the *beys medresh*; he would spend most of the day there and did not come home for the midday meal when the whole household was dining but only toward evening. When he would come to the house,

no one would be at home but Shayne-Serel.¹³ She would set the table for him and bring him gravy and meat, and he would take his seat, look into a book, and eat, and she would sit by the stove and watch him. There was a hint of shyness about his face, and his *payes* curled down over his cheeks like two pretty tubes, and he would gobble and swallow, gobble and swallow, and suck the thoroughly cooked breast. But for the shame of it, she would have jumped up and kissed him! Not, God forbid, out of lust, but out of sheer affection. While she stares at him, her cheeks flame and her eyes sink to her knees and she fills with desire. Yehuda Yoel would get up early to go to the *beys medresh* before dawn, and when he left he would go into her bedroom to wake her, and she would get up and lock the door after him. How she loved those moments when he stood by her bed—loved them more than the whole rest of the night!—even though he disturbed her sleep. One day, she uncovered her breast before he came, and when he came, she pretended to be asleep. The moment he looked at her, his senses froze. He made an effort and called her, but there was no answer; he called again, and there was no answer. He came and touched her. Instantly, a warmth came over him that he had never known before, and his fingers went on trembling over her breast until sunrise.

All that day, he felt sick; a great chill settled onto his limbs as though his blood had run out and his warmth was gone. In bed, he could not sleep; he could not concentrate on the study of Torah, and he would hug the stove and brood inwardly, “But she is a bride, a girl betrothed to be married!” But Ovadiah had not yet married her, so she is presumed single. What harm had he actually done her? Because he had put his hand on her breast, had he disqualified her for marriage? And once he thought about what he had done, he could not take his mind off it. And besides, the internal trembling that he had felt beside her bed kept recurring over and over again. Many times, he impulsively swore that he would never do such a thing again, that he would “incite his impulse for good against his impulse for evil”;¹⁴ but a moment later, Satan would parade her body parts before him, and when he thought of them he regretted not having let his hand linger there longer. Yehuda Yoel recalled that once he was helping Ovadiah count his coins. Yehuda Yoel asked himself, “Why wasn’t I tempted to take any of the coins? I needed to send my subscription fee to the editors of *Supporters of Religion*,¹⁵ and I was short only one krone, and if I had taken one of Ovadiah’s krone, Ovadiah

would not have noticed, and I would be receiving the issues on schedule. Just then, Yehuda Yoel's face turned red as a red currant. To steal? Shocking thought! He immediately began twisting his fingers as if some of the plunder had stuck to them,¹⁶ and perspiration born of fear sprang from his skin, and he looked around like a thief, afraid that someone might have divined his thoughts. When he saw that no one had noticed, he raised his head like a free man. Just then, his eyes fell upon the Two Tablets of the Covenant.¹⁷ Inwardly, he reflected, "Thou shalt not steal" is just as prohibited as "Thou shalt not commit adultery." He who forbade the one forbade the other." Yet he had escaped the former unscathed, whereas he had been damaged by the latter.¹⁸ But Yehuda Yoel felt less bad about the sin that he had committed than that the door to sin had been opened to him. That same day, Yehuda Yoel heard a rabbi preaching that just as we do not know what was so appealing to our ancestors about idolatry, so the future generations will not know what is so appealing to our age about sexual license. Yehuda Yoel said: "We find in the Talmud that the Israelites knew that there was no reality in idolatry; the only reason they pursued it was that it permitted them to engage in flagrant sexual license. This shows that they did not engage in idolatry for its own sake. Rashi explains that their impulse for sexual license so overpowered them that they said, 'Let us throw off the yoke of Torah rather than permit ourselves to be reproached for licentiousness. But their evil impulse for idolatry did not overpower them.'"¹⁹ Moreover, if we compare our impulse for licentiousness with that of the ancients, we find that it has lost its strength, and its sharpness is gone.

As soon it was morning, he got up and lectured himself with rabbinic adages and was about to wake her and go. But his impulse was too quick for him, and he put his hand on her breast until it sank into her fleshy mass. He knew instantly that what he was doing was wrong. He began to worry that she might cry out, and that he would be disgraced. Reason came to him, and he said, "She's sleeping and isn't aware of a thing." And even if she does notice, he can say that he only meant to waken her. And what if they don't believe him? His uncle, a bachelor, once got involved with a servant girl and no one says to him, "Remember what you did back then?" The sages were right when they said, "When a man comes to take a wife, he should first research her brothers, since most children grow up to be like their maternal uncles."²⁰ So he did not take his hand away from her.

Once a person commits a sin and repeats it, it becomes second nature. From then on, when the time came for him to go to the *beys medresh* in the morning, he gave in to his urge. Not just in the morning, but whenever he was in the house and no one else was at home, he gave in to his urge. This was what they would do: she would be sitting by the stove with a stocking in her hand and a bundle of yarn in her lap, pretending to be asleep, and he would creep up to her and put his hand on her breast and play with the bundle in her bosom. This did not go unnoticed by the servant. The servant thrust his hands down on her head and said, "If you do what I say, fine, but if not, I'm going to tell the mistress."²¹ From that moment on, he dominated her. It so happened that on Christmas Eve, the master went to play cards and gave the keys to the shop to the servant; the servant brought them to the shopkeeper's house and found no one but Shayne-Serel at home. Shayne-Serel was busy making up the beds, and she happened to be working on Yehuda Yoel's bed. She shook the straw and spread the sheet and turned over the cover and examined the bedding in case there was a crease in the blanket or an errant straw that might disturb his sleep. As she stood there, two hands encircled her, and Red's intolerable odor percolated into her nose, and the servant forced her onto the bed and fell on top of her. His breath came heavily as a bellows; he stayed with her two or three minutes and then abruptly shoved her aside and spat.

Their later encounters were not like this one; rather, like methodical people, they planned every detail ahead of time. In the attic above the house was the sukkah for the festival, and there was a bed in it so that the ritual of dwelling in the sukkah could be performed correctly. All through the winter, this bed was full of onions, but above the bed was a peg with a woolen cloak hanging on it, and they used the cloak as bedding. When Shayne-Serel would go up to the attic to get water and food for the birds, Red would jump out on her from the corner and shout in her ear and stick a pen in her mouth, and she would take fright and put her hands on her belly and he would squeeze her all around until she gave in.

9.

Ovadiah was still lying in the hospital gorging like the wild ox that is being fattened for the righteous in the next world,²² and everyone who came to the hospital gazed

in astonishment at this healthy person lying among the sick. The orderly, too, would wink and say, "This Ovadiah isn't a workaday patient, he's a Sabbath-and-Festival patient." And a nurse would say, "Outwardly healthy, sickly within." Thus, a person can walk about the market not knowing that he has a kidney ailment, and when he takes to his bed and dies, people lament and say, "Yesterday he was well, and today he lies there dead!," when in reality, the angel of death was already sitting inside him. And the attendant sticks a thermometer under his armpit and says, "Lucky you, Ovadiah, that they knocked you about the legs. If it weren't for those bruises, you would have gone out like a tallow candle by now. You should thank God for your bruises! Let me see your temperature." Ovadiah goes to remove the thermometer and finds a spoon or a fork or a comb. Ovadiah is a natural object of fun for others: Ovadiah is not one of the patients who are seriously ill.

10.

Once on a Thursday, Shayne-Serel was standing in front of a table kneading dough, and Yehuda Yoel, the son of the master of the house, was sitting across from her, paging through the book *Handbook for Rhymes*²³ looking for good rhymes for a poem that he wanted to compose. The Italian rhyme, conditioned as it is by their manner of pronunciation, so unlike our own, did not feel right to him, and his mind was scattered, and he turned the pages and gazed at Shayne-Serel's body as it made its gentle motions. His limbs became slack and his eyes vague, and he sat across from her half-asleep, oppressed by the frustration of desire. He had stopped thinking about his rhymes and was thinking that he was still single and had not yet enjoyed the pleasures of this material world, and that he might die suddenly and never taste the flavor of life, like the author of this book, R. Gershom Hefetz.

Shayne-Serel did her work in silence. She rolled the dough and flattened it like a board. And at every motion of the roller, her belly would twitch. That day was a gentile holiday, and the shop was closed, and her mistress was at home doing her work. Suddenly, her mistress looked at Shayne-Serel and said, "Shayne-Serel, I think that you are getting thicker. Your belly is swollen." Shayne-Serel turned red, and suddenly the mistress screamed, "Slut, get out of here this minute!" Six months Shayne-Serel's fetus had been inside her. When the mistress's anger had subsided

a bit, she glanced at her son to see if he had noticed anything or had put two and two together. Yehuda Yoel's eyes were deep in his book, and he was thinking of the verse from Lamentations that the author's father had quoted in eulogizing his son: "What has a living man to complain about except his own sins."²⁴

That night, Reuven woke up from his sleep. Reuven spread out his arms and asked, "Who's there?" Shayne-Serel quieted Reuven and said, "Shush!" He stretched and saw Shayne-Serel standing beside him, kept silent, and said nothing. Her voice came out of her heart trembling, "It's me, Reuven, hush so that they don't hear." And as if her own words were making her troubles clear to her, she went on, "What shall I do? If you don't marry me, I'll throw myself into the river." Reuven set his hands on the bedding, pulled himself halfway upright, and said nothing. Shayne-Serel said to Reuven, "Reuven!" choking on her tears. Reuven leaned on the bedding and said, "If you don't get out of here right now, I'm going to shout till the whole family comes and sees who you are!" Shayne-Serel swallowed her tears and went away. If he had spoken to her kindly with comforting words or put her off by saying "Come back another time," who knows if Shayne-Serel would have lived out her pregnancy, but now that he had spoken in anger, his reproach did not frighten her but brought her back to her senses. She left him and went wherever she went and found a corner for herself until her pregnancy ended and she gave birth to a son.

11.

On the Friday before Rosh Hashanah, Ovadiah was permitted to go out to try out his legs, and if his walk did not do him any harm, they would let him stay the Sabbath in the hospital and, after that, he would be on his own. He went and bathed and dried himself, and they brought him his own clothes, and he got dressed.²⁵ He took the new crutch and put the tooth brusher in his pocket in the upper part of his coat so that it would be visible, and he went into the hall. Ovadiah was ashamed to return in his filthy clothes, but it was hard for him to leave his fellow patients without saying good-bye. He came to the patients, and he looked at them, and they looked at him. He looked at them to see whether they were making fun of him because of his clothes; and they looked at him because when they saw his clothes, they remembered their own. He went out and walked into town. His knees were

still weak, and he had to walk cautiously. But his walking now was different from what his walking had been. Before he entered the hospital, he limped and crept like a handicapped person, and now he walked like a dandy.

Ovadiah wanted to go to Shayne-Serel, but he had an important question to ask: When is he obligated to recite the benediction for God's kindnesses—on this Sabbath, even though he is still eating and drinking in the hospital? Or next Sabbath, when he will be completely released from the hospital?²⁶ He went to a certain teacher to ask his question.

He found the teacher's assistant sitting by the door tying ritual knots on a *tallis*. He went around the house and approached the assistant stealthily so as to appear to him unexpectedly. Ovadiah said to himself, "Look at him! Today he sits there innocent as a sacrificial lamb, and tomorrow he'll be dancing with girls!" The assistant saw Ovadiah, spat a thick wad, and said, "Is that you?" Ovadiah stuck out his chest where the bristle-thing for his teeth was and said, "I and none other! I in my own glory and majesty!" He said hello and asked, "Where are you coming from? We thought you had run off to Brody and hired yourself out as a nursemaid. I think that we owe you congratulations." Ovadiah was pleased with the congratulations: now that he's well again, what prevents him from getting married, even right now? How long does he have to drift from one place to another without a place of his own? The assistant grabbed hold of him and said, "Let me look at your face, Reb Ovadiah, you look like a young man again. Where are you coming from? Where have you been all this time?" Ovadiah winked at him and said, "You're asking where I was. Didn't you hear that I was sick and that I lay in the hospital? Since that Sabbath when I saw you dancing with all the girls, I haven't gotten out of bed. I saw you dancing, and it made me sick!"²⁷ What a great job you did of visiting the sick! And now you can never make it good, even if you offer your whole house full of silver and gold, because I've been released from the hospital." The assistant said to Ovadiah, "You've been in the hospital?" Ovadiah said, "Why are you opening your mouth at me like a barrel? I was there a whole year!" He said, "A whole year? Amazing!" He said, "And if it was less than a year, have you lost anything?" "And you never went out?" He said, "World-class idiot! If someone says, 'I didn't get out of bed,' do you ask him, 'Didn't you go out?'" The assistant looked at him and said, "So you make babies by telegraph, Ovadiah?" Ovadiah said,

“What does the telegraph have to do with having babies?” The assistant looked at Ovadiah in astonishment; he had seen Shayne-Serel pregnant up to the teeth. His mouth was open, and on his lips hovered the kind of smile that you see on lascivious men even when they are doing nothing wrong. At this point, the owner of the *tallis* came and asked for his *tallis*. Ovadiah turned and left. As he walked along, he came to the shop of Shayne-Serel’s employer. He said, “Shall I go in and buy her some candies?” He entered humbly and said “Hello!” and got his hand ready to return a greeting to anyone who offered one.²⁸ There were no customers in the shop; the shopkeeper sat at his table, counting coins, and the servant was opening a crate of sugar. The servant saw Ovadiah, lifted his head, and brandished the ax. When Ovadiah asked how he was, he lowered his head and went back to his task. Ovadiah opened his money purse and took out a coin and again greeted the shopkeeper and waited for the shopkeeper to turn his attention to him. The shopkeeper stuck out his head and said nothing.

As Ovadiah was standing there, there came a cry from the corner. Ovadiah had come in from light to darkness and did not see anyone but only heard the voice of someone speaking, the voice of the mistress of the house: “Here he is, this prince of a man! Maybe you’ve come to collect your sermon-gift!”²⁹ The shopkeeper raised his head from the coins and said in an ambiguous tone, “My friend, why have you given me the honor of coming to me?” Ovadiah gave the coin to the shopkeeper and said what he wanted. The shopkeeper took a jar of candies, shook the jar, and put some candies on a piece of paper. Meanwhile, his wife emerged from her hiding place and cried, “Just look at this piece of filth! You can’t even keep a maid in the same house with him! Give him his candies, and I hope he chokes on them!” Ovadiah stood there speechless at this dressing-down, with no idea in the world why the mistress of the house was shouting at him. The shopkeeper weighed the candies, took some away and added a few, and handed them over to Ovadiah. Ovadiah humbled himself even more, took the candies, and went away.

Ovadiah looked back at everything he had ever done and could find nothing to reproach himself for. He kicked the ground and said, “So if she’s angry, so what? Let her be angry until she’s had enough of it. In any case, I’m glad she’s in the shop and not in the house. I’ll go to the house and see Shayne-Serel.” But as he walked, his complacency faded.

12.

He came to the house and found a different servant girl. Ovadiah looked at her and asked, "And Shayne-Serel, what's happened to her?" The servant girl became suspicious and chased him away. Ovadiah stood outside, scratched his head, and considered where he should go; he took a few turns on his crutch trying to decide where he might find Shayne-Serel. Clearly, Shayne-Serel has left the house of that shopkeeper and gotten work with someone else, but with whom? Ovadiah was both worried and sad; not only had he not found her, but he didn't know where to turn. Could she have gone to fetch water from the fountain? Not that it was the right moment for doing that, but Ovadiah was looking for a hook on which to hang his hopes. Before he got there, doubt entered his mind: maybe she is there, and maybe she isn't; but if she isn't there, the water carriers will detain him. So what should he do to find her? He'll go first to the marriage broker,³⁰ and she will tell him where Shayne-Serel is working. Ovadiah put his hand in his pocket, felt among the candies, and went to the broker.

He came near the broker's house and saw something that looked like a woman, and he gazed at her from a distance and thought, "Shayne-Serel or not Shayne-Serel?" It was not the Sabbath or a holiday, so why in the world should she be sitting on the stoop of the house? Doesn't she have anything to do? Doesn't she have any chores? Or maybe, God forbid, she's sick and isn't allowed to work yet. He'll go up to her and say, "Come, look, Serele, darling, we are like a single body! Just as it is with the body, when one limb is sick the whole body feels it, so are we; as soon as I fell sick, you fell sick just like me. Thank God we're both back on our feet and well again! You see, Shayne-Serele, my heart aches to think that you were sick. But in the future, we will remember this and take comfort." Or was he mistaken, and she is someone else? For she has a baby at her breast. It's just like people always say: "That fool doesn't even recognize his own wife!"

Ovadiah gazed at the great, thick shadow of that woman, whose face became more and more familiar. A great sorrow began to envelop him. Ovadiah had thought that he was approaching his bride, but when he was close, he found it was someone else. He stopped and called out, "Shayne-Serel! Shayne-Serel!" Not because he thought it was Shayne-Serel but so as to find out for certain that it was not Shayne-Serel. No sound, no answer. He went closer to the stoop and found Shayne-Serel

sitting on the stoop, her breast uncovered and a child on her lap and her fat chin hanging down to her breast. Ovadiah looked ahead and put one hand on the crutch and the other on the candies in his pocket. The candies began to melt in his hand, and their sweetness began to drip between his fingers. Shayne-Serel raised her head and covered her breast. The child began to cry and stretched out his hand toward her blouse. Shayne-Serel stuck the nipple of her breast into the infant's mouth and cried, "Here it is, bastard! Suck it and choke!"

The infant seized his mother's breast with all ten fingers, and his reddish hair stuck out from under the loops of his cap. Shayne-Serel stared at Ovadiah and the infant, and her green eyes filled with rage. As for Ovadiah, his mouth was open and his tongue lay in it like a stone that is too heavy to turn, and the candies in his hand kept on melting. The infant nursed contentedly at his mother's breast, muttering quietly. Ovadiah took the candies in his right hand and the crutch in his left. The child had had enough and let go the breast with one hand, but Shayne-Serel had not yet calmed down from her rage. Ovadiah, afraid to give her the candies, bent down and put them in the infant's palm.

NOTES

- 1 Genesis 2:18
- 2 Proverbs 18:22
- 3 The canopy under which marriages are solemnized; i.e., once she is a wife.
- 4 The word used here, *neḥerefet*, derives from Leviticus 19:20, although it has a completely different meaning there, where it refers to a bondmaid designated as a wife for another slave. Agnon's usage here implies a derivation from the more usual meanings of the root; i.e., shame or scandal.
- 5 On the festival of Simḥat Torah, when the annual cycle of Torah readings is completed and recommenced, the men who preside over the reading of the final passage of Deuteronomy and the opening passage of Genesis are called, respectively, "the bridegroom of the Torah" and "the bridegroom of 'In the Beginning.'" They are summoned to the reading table with an elaborate chant on the part of the cantor, which is what is alluded to here, and sometimes with dancing on the part of the congregation.

- 6 This plea derives from the words of the angel to Abraham when he is about to slaughter Isaac at God's command (Genesis 22:12). The angel says "Do nothing to him," but tradition interprets the word "nothing" (*me'umah*) as if it were the similar-sounding word meaning "blemish" (*mum*). Thus the angel's command was understood to mean "Do not kill the boy or even wound him."
- 7 Presumably, smelling salts, a preparation containing ammonia.
- 8 Literally "everyone with leprosy or a sexual discharge," from Numbers 5:2, used humorously to suggest every kind of ailment, especially ones that are generally considered revolting.
- 9 *Talles koton* is an undershirt with ritual fringes; *humesb* refers to the printed text of the Torah; a *siddur* is a prayer book; and *payes* are the sidelocks worn by men of strict religious observance.
- 10 *Haftore* is a reading from the prophets in the synagogue, performed after the weekly portion of the Torah has been read. The book of Obadiah's one chapter is indeed the prescribed prophetic reading for the portion of the Torah called *parshes Vayyishlah*, Genesis 32:4–36:43.
- 11 Psalm 68:20
- 12 Agnon's paraphrase of part of Ecclesiastes 12:6.
- 13 Although not actually a quotation from Genesis 39:11 (the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife), the repeated use of the word *bayit* ("house") in this erotic situation is a clear allusion to it.
- 14 The Talmud's advice for people tempted to commit a sin, b. Berakhot 5a.
- 15 An Orthodox periodical in Hebrew called *Maḥaziqei hadat* (or Ashkenazi vocalization, *hadas*), published in Hebrew in Lemberg (present-day Lviv) from 1879 until 1914. In 1910, an annual subscription cost twelve krone.
- 16 Like the wicked Achan, who appropriated for himself some of the plunder of Jericho in Joshua 7:1.
- 17 The image of the Ten Commandments over the holy ark.
- 18 An allusion to the famous talmudic parable about the four who entered an orchard (b. Hagigah 14b). The Talmud says that only Akiva went in whole and came out whole, but that Ben Zoma "looked and was damaged [*venifga*]." The last word is usually understood to mean that Ben Zoma went mad or that he abandoned religion.

- 19 b. Sanhedrin 63b. Rashi is the eleventh-century rabbi whose commentary is printed in most editions of the Talmud.
- 20 b. Bava Batra 110a, with a slight alteration.
- 21 Alludes to a famous midrash (b. Shabbat 88a) according to which God thrust (*kafa*) Mount Sinai down over the heads of the Israelites and compelled them to accept the Torah.
- 22 Various rabbinic sources speak of a feast that God will hold for the righteous in the world to come. The main dishes to be served (b. Bava Batra 74b) are the Leviathan and the Behemot-on-the-Thousand-Mountains, a mythical land animal sometimes called the Wild Ox.
- 23 *Yad ḥaruzim*, literally “a hand or handle of rhymes,” by Gershom ben Moses Ḥefetz, first published in Venice in 1699–1700. The title is a pun on the phrase *yad ḥarutsim*, the hand of the diligent (Proverbs 10:4). The book was published on the initiative of the author’s father, Moses ben Gershom Ḥefetz, after the nineteen-year-old author’s death.
- 24 Lamentations 3:39 as interpreted by Rashi. This quotation does not appear in the introduction by the author’s father to *Yad ḥaruzim*.
- 25 A witty application of the procedures of the high priest on Yom Kippur, as described in the Mishnah (m. Yoma 7:4).
- 26 This benediction is required by Jewish religious tradition on several occasions, including recovery from an illness. It is usually recited publicly in the course of a synagogue service.
- 27 The words translated “dancing” and “sick” form a pun in Hebrew based on the similarity of the roots *ḥet-vav-lamed* (“to dance”) and *ḥet-lamed-beh* (“to be sick”).
- 28 Ingenious appropriation of m. Berakhot 2:1.
- 29 It was customary for a bridegroom to deliver a sermon or a learned discourse and to be rewarded with gifts of money.
- 30 Agnon avoids the usual word, *shadkhanit*, and instead uses a word that ordinarily means “procuress.”