

Jewish Fairy Tales and Legends  
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<http://www.sacred-texts.com/jud/jftl/index.htm>

## The Beggar King

Proud King Hagag sat on his throne in state, and the high priest, standing by his side, read from the Holy Book, as was his daily custom. He read these words: "For riches are not for ever: and doth the crown endure to every generation?"

"Cease!" cried the king. "Who wrote those words?"

"They are the words of the Holy Book," answered the high priest.

"Give me the book," commanded the king.

With trembling hands the high priest placed it before his majesty. King Hagag gazed earnestly at the words that had been read, and he frowned. Raising his hand, he tore the page from the book and threw it to the ground.

"I, Hagag, am king," he said, "and all such passages that offend me shall be torn out."

He flung the volume angrily from him while the high priest and all his courtiers looked on in astonishment.

"I have heard enough for today," he said. "Too long have I delayed my hunting expedition. Let the horses be got ready."

He descended from the throne, stalked haughtily past the trembling figure of the high priest, and went forth to the hunt. Soon he was riding furiously across an open plain toward a forest where a wild stag had been seen. A trumpet sounded the signal that the deer had been driven from its hiding place, and the king urged his horse forward to be the first in the chase. His majesty's steed was the swiftest in the land. Quickly it carried him out of sight of his nobles and attendants. But the deer was surprisingly fleet and the king could not catch up with it. Coming to a river, the animal plunged in and swam across. Scrambling up the opposite bank its antlers caught in the branch of a tree, and the king, arriving at the river, gave a cry of joy.

"Now I have thee," he said. Springing from his horse and divesting himself of his clothing he swam across with naught but a sword.

As he reached the opposite bank, however, the deer freed itself from the tree and plunged into a thicket. The king, with his sword in his hand, followed quickly, but no deer could he see. Instead, he found, lying on the ground beyond the thicket, a beautiful youth clad in a deer-skin. He was panting as if after a long run. The king stood still in surprise and the youth sprang to his feet.

"I am the deer," he said. "I am a genii and I have lured thee to this spot, proud king, to teach thee a lesson for thy words this morning."

Before King Hagag could recover from his surprise the youth ran back to the river and swam across. Quickly he dressed himself in the king's clothes and mounted the horse just as the other hunters came up. They thought the genii was King Hagag and they halted before him.

"Let us return," said the genii. "The deer has crossed the river and has escaped."

King Hagag from the thicket on the opposite side watched them ride away and then flung himself on the ground and wept bitterly. There he lay until a wood-cutter found him.

"What do you here?" asked the man.

"I am King Hagag," returned the monarch.

"Thou art a fool," said the wood-cutter. "Thou art a lazy good-for-naught to talk so. Come, carry my bundle of sticks and I will give thee food and an old garment."

In vain the king protested. The wood-cutter only laughed the more, and at last, losing patience, he beat him and drove him away. Tired and hungry, and clad only in the rags which the wood-cutter had given him, King Hagag reached the palace late at night.

"I am King Hagag," he said to the guards, but roughly they bade him begone, and after spending a wretched night in the streets of the city, his majesty, next morning, was glad to accept some bread and milk offered to him by a poor old woman who took pity on him. He stood at a street corner not knowing what to do. Little children teased him; others took him for a beggar and offered him money. Later in the day he saw the genii ride through the streets on his horse. All the people bowed down before him and cried, "Long live the king!"

"Woe is me," cried Hagag, in his wretchedness. "I am punished for my sin in scoffing at the words of the Holy Book."

He saw that it would be useless for him to go to the palace again, and he went into the fields and tried to earn his bread as a laborer. He was not used to work, however, and but for the kindness of the very poorest he would have died of starvation. He wandered miserably from place to place until he fell in with some blind beggars who had been deserted by their guide. Joyfully he accepted their offer to take the guide's place.

Months rolled by, and one morning the royal heralds went forth and announced that "Good King Hagag" would give a feast a week from that day to all the beggars in the land.

From far and near came beggars in hundreds, to partake of the king's bounty, and Hagag stood among them, with his blind companions, in the courtyard of the palace waiting for his majesty to appear. He knew the place well, and he hung his head and wept.

"His majesty will speak to each one of you who are his guests today," cried a herald, and one by one they passed into the palace and stood before the throne. When it came to Hagag's turn, he trembled so much that he had to be supported by the guards.

The genii on the throne and Hagag looked long at each other.

"Art thou, too, a beggar?" said the genii.

"Nay, gracious majesty," answered Hagag with bent head. "I have sinned grievously and have been punished. I am but the servant of a troop of blind beggars to whom I act as guide."

The genii king signed to his courtiers that he desired to be left alone with Hagag. Then he said:

"Hagag, I know thee. I see that thou hast repented. It is well. Now canst thou resume thy rightful place."

"Gracious majesty," said Hagag, "I have learned humility and wisdom. The throne is not for me. The blind beggars need me. Let me remain in their service."

"It cannot be," said the genii. "I see that thou art truly penitent. Thy lesson is learned and my task is done. I will see that the blind beggars lack not."

With his own hands he placed the royal robes on Hagag and himself donned those of the beggar. When the courtiers returned they saw no difference. King Hagag sat on the throne again, and nowhere in the whole world was there a monarch who ruled more wisely or showed more kindness and sympathy to all his subjects.