One of the most surprising stories found in the legends of the Sages is the story of *Rabbi Matia ben Cheresh* who blinded his eyes with a red-hot nail, in order to escape the temptations of the devil who appeared before him in the house of study, posing as a woman. Although *Rabbi Matia* is a *Tanna*, this story is never mentioned in classical or post-classical Talmud midrashic literature. The episode is found in three sources from the Middle Ages, which are not primary/ from the rishonim: the *Yalkut Shimoni* to the Torah (in the exegesis about Joseph), as an addition to the *Tanhuma based on a* manuscript in Oxford at the end of *Parshat* *Chukat* (Buber edition) under the title 'from *parshat parah'*, and in the *Eseret Hadibrot Midrash*, under the command 'Do not commit adultery'. In several Middle Ages sources the story is called *'Tanhuma'* or *'Yilamdeinu'* - and it seems that at some point it was attached to the *Midrash Tanhuma* version. In this lecture, I will try to trace the evolution of this story, identify its origins and put it in historical context . These are the words of the story according to the *Yalkut Shimoni*: [מקור 1]

There was a story with *Rabbi Matia ben Cheresh* who was sitting at home and engaged in Torah study. The radiance of his face was similar to the sun and his countenance similar to the ministering angels, for he had never looked upon a woman in his life. One time Satan passed by and became jealous. He [satan] said, "Can it be that a man like this has not sinned? He [satan] said to God: Master of the Universe; Matia, what is he before you? He [God] responded: He is an entirely righteous man. He [satan] said to him [God]: Give me permission and I will seduce him ... He [satan] appeared to him as a beautiful woman, which the world had not seen since the days of *Naama* the sister of *Tubal Cain,* who the angels had erred with ... she stood before him. When she saw him, he turned his face and turned his back. She came again and stood on his left hand side. He turned his face to the right side, and she would turn towards him on each side. He said 'I am afraid that the evil inclination will overcome me and cause me to sin. What did that righteous man do? He called to the student who served him and said to him: Go and bring me fire and a nail. He brought it to him. He put the nail in the fire and then in his eyes. When Satan saw this he was so shocked that he fell backwards. At the same time God called Raphael and said to him: Go and heal *Matia*. He [Raphael] came and stood before him [Matia] and said to him who are you? He said: I am Raphael, whom God sent to heal your eyes. He [Matia] said to him[Raphael]: let me be, what happened is finished. He [Raphael] returned to God and said to him: Master of the Universe, *Matia* said such and such. He [God] responded: go tell him I guarantee that the evil inclination will not have control over him. He [Raphael] immediately healed him [matia]. Hence the sages said: Anyone who does not look at women and how much more so a friend's wife, his evil inclination does not control him.

This dramatic story is brought in ethics literature as an example of the determination that must be used in the war against the evil inclination. For example, Elnekave, in his book *Menorat Hameor*, praises Rabbi *Matia* for his act [מקור 2]. Roth, founder of the *Shomer Emunim* group, goes even further in his book *Taharat Hakodesh*, when he writes that **"really, every man should act in this way and (it is preferable) to blind physical eyes than to blind spiritual eyes**". He proves this fact from the fact that Matia is considered holy and righteous" [מקור 3]. However, anyone who is familiar with the stories of the Sages in classic rabbinic literature immediately senses problematic nature of this story. According to this story, it is best for a person to blind his eyes, in order to ensure that he will not sin with them. However, the approach of the Sages is to get to know the evil inclination and contend with it, but not by maiming oneself.

The Sages worldview is realistic, human and complex. The Sages offered a variety of tips for dealing with the evil inclination. For example: "the left pushes away and the right brings close", "Satisfy him (the inclination) he is hungry; starve him- he is satisfied,"; "If you encounter this contemptible being, drag him to the House of Study ..."; recite the *Shema*, remember the day of death, or even: "If a man sees that his inclination is overtaking him, he should go to a place where people don't recognize him, wear black and cover himself in black, and do as he wishes as long as he does not desecrate God's name in public." However in no case is he supposed to resort to self-harm.

Orbach wrote, "extraordinary mortification is almost completely absent (from rabbinic literature), and we don't find scholars who disagreed with the law formulated by Rabbi *Akiva*, that a person may not injure himself, even in the act of martyrdom." He mentions our story as a noted exception.

The motif of blinding one's eyes to deal with the evil inclination is known to the Sages and they use it metaphorically; specifically relating to blinding the devil's/inclinations eyes. The *Talmud* teaches that regarding the 'inclination to sin' one should 'color its eyes and leave it be', and according to *Rashi* this means blind the evil inclination's eyes and leave him. Rabbi *Chisda* also echoed this sentiment: "in this matter I am superior to my friends, that I got married at 16. If I had married at the age of 14, it would be like an arrow in the eyes of the devil." This means that according to the Sages, healthy marriages pluck out the eyes of the inclination, and not injury to the person himself.

According to the *Mishnah*, one is not allowed to injure himself. According to the *Tosefta*, it is forbidden for one to harm his body even if it causes him damage, unless it is life threatening.

The Sages also opposed extreme asceticism, including Pharisees who damaged their bodies. The *Mishnah* states: " He used to say, a foolish *Hassid*, a cunning rouge, a female Pharisee, and the plague of Pharisees bring destruction upon the world." The *Baraita* there lists seven types of people who are self-denying and mentions them disparagingly: "the shikmi Pharisee, the nikpi Pharisee, the kizai Pharisee..". some of them hurt their bodies. The 'kizai Pharisee' is explained in the *Talmud*: "the one who blood lets to the walls." And according to *Rashi*: "makes himself out to be closing his eyes in order not to look at women and as a result hits his head against the wall and blood comes out." According to this interpretation, the similarity to the story of *Matia* is clear, and hence we learn that the sages disapproved of such withdrawal and saw it as an example of a foolish *Hassid*.

It thus turns out that *Matia's* action of blinding himself to avoid temptation and the message that comes out from the story, stand in direct opposition to the Talmudic sources cited. Therefore it is hard to see this story as a product of the school of the Sages. However, it seems that the world view behind the story and its cultural context specifically reflect the Christian world.

First it should be noted that this story is an illustration of a saying in the Gospels which is attributed to Jesus and is mentioned in his name several times: ...

This Christian idea of ​​religious law repeats itself in a number of religious sentences relating to Sextus (second century CE): ...

The underlying concept of these Christian passages is that the body; it's instincts, needs and desires - cause man to sin and the extraction of human organs which inhibit people, prevent the possibility of sin. It is therefore better to displace the organs than to sin with them. This concept is exactly what underlies our story; it is better for *Matia* to blind his eyes so as not to sin with them.

Christian hagiographic literature is full of stories of monks and holy fathers who desired to remove their desire. Augustine confesses to the temptations of the eyes and writes that he wishes to be blind of the 'physical light'. He expounded on the verse ...- but did not mean physical blindness but rather weaning himself from sensory vision and desire. This path was followed by those who secluded themselves in deserts and monasteries and moreover those who interpreted the words of Jesus in a practical way and castrated themselves. Sextus already established in his sentences: ...

This practice was already prominent in Christianity in the early centuries and throughout the Middle Ages. In the Eastern Roman Empire, self-castration was common amongst devout Christians to prevent lust, even after the ecclesiastical canon law (starting from the Conference of Nicaea in 325) condemned it.

Needless to say, such acts are prohibited by Judaism. Rabbi *Yehuda Hachassid*, who advocated penance, writes that one may not commit a sin in order to prevent a sin, "such as the one that was sinful with women and castrates himself in order to avoid further sin."

However, the figure of *Matia*, as evidenced from the exposition of the story, has the characteristics of a Christian monk. "He never lifted his eyes towards a woman", his time spent in the study hall and his *Torah* learning are done in isolation from society, and his description: "the radiance of his face resembled to the sun..." can be associated with the Christian halo drawn around the heads of saints. In addition, the perception of Satan as external to the individual, as well as the promise at the end of the paragraph, which makes it out be as if it is really possible to permanently uproot the inclination, are characteristics of Christianity.

So what is the origin of this story and how did it reach the anonymous *Midrash*?

*Matia's* story is reminiscent of the miraculous stories of Christian saint literature and of martyrs stories. Emanuel Ben-Gurion compared our story with the story of Anthony the Great, who is seduced by the devil, who appears before him in the form of a beautiful maiden. Anthony "cools the embers" and is saved from temptation without harm. The frame story in 'the life of Anthony' parallels our story about *Matia* at every stage. Antony isolates himself and Satan tries to make him sin in various ways. Antony condemns himself to asceticism and stands up to all of the tortures and temptations until the devil concedes. At the end, he is assured that his inclination will no longer attempt to harm him and that God will always assist him. However, this story lacks the motif of blinding ones self to prevent temptation.

Another church seduction story mentioned in connection to our story is quoted in The Golden Legend story collection. In this story, the devil is envious of a particular bishop known for his righteousness. As a result he disguises himself as a beautiful nun who comes to seek shelter by the bishop, in order to seduce him. The bishop dines with her at the table and finds it difficult to resist her beauty, which grows by the minute. However, St. Andrew, whom the bishop admires, arrives at the house in the figure of a pilgrim and saves him from sin, by exposing this woman as the devil. This story also starts off like our story, but in the continuation the bishop does not injure himself to be saved and were it not for external intervention, he would have sinned.

I would like to present you with the way I went about searching for the story, because I believe we can learn from the method itself on the phenomena and the historical context which we are dealing with.

The closest equivalent to our story in Jewish sources is presented by *Yehudah Aryeh from Modena* in his book 'צמח צדיק'.

This story tells of a modest woman who was fancied by the town officer and asked her to forcefully sleep with him. When she asked him what attracted him to her, he responded that her beautiful eyes caught his attention. In response, the woman gouged out both of her eyes with a knife, placed them in front of the officer and said: "Because of your great love for these eyes, I am giving them to you, to do with them as you please." This story, presented by Modena as the paragon of the quality of modesty and after appropriate words of an ethical nature, is parallel to the story of *Rabbi Matia ben Charash* in that it demonstrates a willingness to ward off sexual temptation even at the expense of blinding one's self.

It is specifically this story that teaches about the Christian origin of this unique motif, because this story, like other stories from *Tzemach Tzadik*, was translated and edited by Modena from a collection of Christian Italian stories called *Fiore di virtu* (flowers of morality [and hence the name of the book in Hebrew]). Modena replaced part of the original ethical teachings, especially those that were Christian, with ethical teachings from Jewish sources, and translated the collection of stories, while adapting it to his readers.

The original story is found in an Italian collection from a book about the 'Lives of the Holy Fathers (without going into detail or specifying a particular source) as an illustration of the words of the church fathers quoted there. In the Italian story, a nun is taken from a convent by a Minister who wanted her, and the story ends with the ethical lesson that "...". These ethical teachings relate to the words of Jesus we brought prior, in the context of the story of *Matia*..., and it that the nun's story illustrates them. It is important to note that the act of the nun, exactly like the story of Matia, is more radical than what Jesus said, because the words of Jesus (in all of the parallel versions) spoke of gouging out one eye, while the nun, much like Matia, gouged both eyes.

As mentioned prior, the editor of the Italian collection, *Fiore di virtu*, which to the best of our knowledge is dated to the thirteenth century at the earliest, informs us that the origin of the story of the nun are the stories of the Christian saints. However, the identification of the holy Christian which this story is alluding to, is not conclusive and it turns out that there are a number of Christian saints which a story such as this could be referring to. The most famous of which, is Saint Lucy of Syracuse (end of the third century). Legend has it that after her mother betrothed her to a pagan she swore on the grave of a Christian saint to keep her virginity and she gave out her engagement dowry to the poor. Consequently, she was tried and sentenced to be used for prostitution, but she refused and they tore out her eyes and burned her in a fire, but miraculously her eyes were restored and her body was not burned, so they chopped off her head. According to another version of the story which may have been before the editor of the Fiore di virtu collection, she removed her own eyes and gave them to the judge, which is symbolized in many works of art and Middle Ages customs, as the devil. According to another legend, Rafael returned her eyes to her in much the same way, which is presented in our story.

Lucia became a saint in Sicily and throughout the Christian world and the story was well-known for centuries after her death.

Iconographic evidence of Lucia's early patronage of sight, appears in a fresco from the ancient Romanesque church of San Pedro near Barcelona .... there remains an image of Lucia with her martyr's palm in her right hand and, in her left, two eyes on a salver.

Similar versions of this story are told of a Saint named Odelia and another saint, Paraskevi of Rome (second century), who are considered the guardians of the blind. It seems, therefore, that one of these stories, which are relatively early, is the story which the legend is alluding to in the Fiore di virtu collection and from there it made its way into Modena's book. The story of the holy Christian saint seems to be the same story which is the basis for our story about Rabbi *Matia ben Charash*  and is probably the inspiration for his work because the similarity between his actions and the actions of Sister Lucia are obvious.