

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [8]

Yosef Who Cherishes Shabbat (Insights into Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 119a) (Revised: January 2020)



Background of Our Story

Chaldeans and Soothsayers

Daniel 2:2-5

ב וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ לְקָרָא לְחַרְטָמִּים וְלֹאֲשָׁפִים, וְלִמְכַשְׁפִּים וּלְכַשְׂדִּים, לְהַגִּיד לְמֶלֶךְ, חֲלֻמֹתָיו; וַיְבֹאוּ, וַיַּעֲמְדוּ לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ

"And the king commanded to summon the necromancers, the astrologers, the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans to tell the king his dreams, and they came and stood before the king. And the king said to them, "I dreamed a dream, and my spirit is troubled to know the dream." Then the Chaldeans spoke to the king in Aramaic, "May the king live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we shall tell the interpretation." The king replied and said to the Chaldeans, "The matter has escaped me. If you do not let me know the dream and its meaning, you shall be torn limb from limb, and your houses shall be made into a dungheap."

Soothsayer

A soothsayer is a person who claims to speak sooth: specifically one who predicts the future based upon personal, political, spiritual, or religious beliefs rather than scientific facts. Typically, soothsayers include: Prophets, Fortune tellers, Practitioners of divination, Oracles, Haruspices , Augurs, Astrologers, Shamans.

[vocabulary.com](https://www.vocabulary.com)

A fortune teller is also known as a soothsayer, or someone who claims to be able to predict the future. Long ago, a soothsayer might have been considered a useful

consultant, even for a government, but today soothsayers are more likely to be scoffed at. Still, there are many soothsayers who have successful businesses telling people's fortunes and giving advice. *Soothsayer* comes from the Old English word for "truth," combined with "say," together meaning "an act of speaking the truth."

Preparing for Shabbat

Babylonian Talmud, Beitza 16a

It is taught in a baraita: They said about Shammai the Elder that all his days he would eat in honor of Shabbat. How so? If he found a choice animal, he would say: This is for Shabbat. If he subsequently found another one choicer than it, he would set aside the second for Shabbat and eat the first. He would eat the first to leave the better quality animal for Shabbat, which continually rendered his eating an act of honoring Shabbat.

However, Hillel the Elder had a different trait, that all his actions, including those on a weekday, were for the sake of Heaven, as it is stated: "Blessed be the Lord, day by day; He bears our burden, our God who is our salvation; Selah" (Psalms 68:20), meaning that God gives a blessing for each and every day. That is also taught in a baraita in more general terms: Beit Shammai say: From the first day of the week, Sunday, start preparing already for your Shabbat. And Beit Hillel say: "Blessed be the Lord, day by day."

According to the Talmud (Beitza 16a), Shammai understood the verse (Shemot 20:8) "Remember the Shabbat to keep it holy" to mean that one should start putting aside food for Shabbat even at the beginning of week. His cycle of eating was always geared towards the honor of Shabbat, for if he would come into possession of a good animal, he would set it aside for the Shabbat meal; but if he would later find an even better animal, he would eat the first and set aside the second for the Shabbat meal.

By contrast, Hillel believed that, because of his deep faith in God, he would be furnished with a festive meal for Shabbat even if he would not put aside the good animal at the beginning of the week. Instead, he would eat it right away. Nonetheless, Hillel would agree that most people who do not reach his level of trust in God should act in accordance with Shammai. (See Mishna Berura 250:2.)

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 119a

יוסף מוקיר שבי, הוה ההוא גוי בשבבותיה, דהוה נפיש נכסיה טובא. אמרי ליה פלדאי: כוליהו נכסי – יוסף מוקיר שבי אכיל להו. אזל זבנינהו לכולהו נכסי, זבן בהו מרגניתא, אורתבה כסינייה. בהדי דקא עבר מברא – אפרחיה זיקא, שדייה במיא, בלעיה כורא. אסקיה איתיה אפניא דמעלי שבתא. אמרי: מאן זבין כי השתא? אמרי להו: זילו אמטויהו לגבי יוסף מוקיר שבי, דרגיל דזבין. אמטויהו ניהליה, זבניה. קרעיה, אשכח ביה מרגניתא, זבניה בתליסר עיליתא דדינרי דדקהבא.

פגע ביה ההוא סבא, אמר: מאן דיזיה שבתא – פרעיה שבתא.

Yosef who cherishes Shabbat: There was a gentile in his neighborhood whose property was extremely plentiful. The astrologers said to the gentile with regard to all his property: Yosef who cherishes Shabbat will consume it.

The gentile went and sold all of his property, and with the money he bought a pearl, and he placed it in his hat. When he was crossing a river in a ferry, the wind blew his hat and cast it into the water, and a fish swallowed it. The fish was caught and removed from the water and it was brought to shore adjacent to nightfall on Shabbat eve. The fishermen said: Who buys fish at a time like this? The townspeople said to the fishermen: Go bring it to Yosef who cherishes Shabbat, as he regularly purchases delicacies in deference to Shabbat. They brought it to him and he purchased it. He ripped the fish open and found a pearl inside it. He sold it for thirteen vessels filled with golden dinars

This elderly man who encountered him and said: One who lends to Shabbat, Shabbat repays him.



Explaining the Story - What is going on in our story? (Explain the sequence of events)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

Bonus **?** Did Yosef –according to the story- know the gentile?

? Why did the gentile sell all his property and buy an expensive pearl?

? Why did a wind blow and cast the hat into the water?

Bonus **?** What do you think is the Talmud’s opinion of the astrologers?

★ **?** Why did the townspeople send the fisherman to Yosef?

Bonus **?** Why did Yosef buy the fish even though it was so close to Shabbat? Didn’t he have food prepared for Shabbat?

? The name of the hero of our story is “Yosef”. However, each time his name appears in the story we read about him as “Yosef who cherishes Shabbat.” Why?

Bonus **?** What do you think Yosef did with all the money he got from the sale of the pearl?

Extra Bonus **?** Why was Yosef rewarded with the pearl?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Extra Bonus **?** Our story has an epilogue: "*This elderly man encountered him (Yosef) and said: "One who lends to Shabbat, Shabbat repays him."* What do you think about this epilogue? Why was it inserted at the end of our story? Do you like it? Why yes? Why not?

"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from the Text



Your most important presentation card (your name) is your values!



Live by your values, do always the right thing, and your life will be enriched.



What is the message of our story? On the surface it seems to be a story about the importance of preparing for Shabbat -in the Shamai tradition- and the reward promised to those who "lend to the Shabbat." Indeed, this is the way this well-known Talmudic story has been retold many times as a children's story.

On a deeper level, however, our story is one about loyalty to one's values with no expectation of any reward. Yosef is well known among the townspeople as someone who cherishes the Shabbat. This value in Yosef's life is so salient that it became an inseparable part of his name. The fishermen go to Yosef because he "*regularly purchases.*" This regularity, the countless times that Yosef *put his money (literally) where his mouth was, is what brings the pearl to him. Although the story doesn't tell us what Yosef did with the money he got for the pearl, we can only imagine that not only didn't he change his values, but he used his new wealth to continue to live by them and to further propagate them.*"

Extra Bonus ? Why was Yosef rewarded with the pearl?

Answer 1: He was rewarded because he observed Shabbat. Keep Shabbat and you will be rewarded as well!

Answer 2: Because it was written in the stars that he would!

Answer 3: Because he did exactly the same thing he did regularly, every Shabbat eve, without expectation of any reward.