

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [17]

Woe to Glorious Wisdom in an Ugly Vessel!

Insights into Babylonian Talmud Ta'anit 7a

Revised on October 2020



Background to Our Story

Hellenistic View of the Human Body



<https://njop.org/chanukah/judaism-vs-hellenism/>

Greek culture placed the highest value on the physical and gave the world the idea that beauty is, in itself, a supreme ideal. Epitomizing this worship of the physical was the Greek passion for athletics. Among their first actions, the Greeks built gymnasiums in every city they conquered. The Greek athletics were held in the nude, highlighting the beauty of the human being. This physical glorification is one example of the Hellenistic view of nature as supreme.

The Daughter of the Emperor



The Talmud: the Steinsaltz Edition. Volume XIII. Tractate Ta'Anit. Part I. Published by Random House, New York, 1995. Page 83.

In the first century C.E. there was great interest in other religions –including Judaism – among the leaders of the Roman society. Not only were their philosophers interested in comparing their doctrines with those of the Rabbis, but people from the highest level of Roman society were eager to enter into spiritual discussion with these Sages. Many high-ranking women became interested in Judaism not only intellectually but also as a personal way of life. Some women actually converted, while a large number showed interest in Jewish thought and customs. A whole class of “those who fear the Lord” were to be found in Rome, and these people were much influenced by everything Jewish, including the Torah.

Joshua ben Hananiah



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joshua_ben_Hananiah

Joshua ben Hananiah (Hebrew: יהושע בן חנניה Yəhōšuaʿ ben Ḥānanyāh; d. 131 CE), also known as Rabbi Yehoshua, was a leading tanna of the first half-century following the destruction of the Temple. He is the seventh most frequently mentioned sage in the Mishnah



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Berachot. Koren Publishers. Jerusalem.

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This is Rabbi Yehoshua ben Ḥananya the Levite, one of the leading Sages in the generation following the destruction of the Second Temple. He had served as one of the Levite singers in the Temple. After its destruction, he was among the students who went with their primary teacher, Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, to Yavne. Unlike his colleague Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua completely adhered to the approach of his teacher and of Beit Hillel.

Lived in the 1st and 2nd Century CE in the land of Israel. One of the five main disciples of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, as we read in Avot 2:10-11:

Mishna 10

"Rabban Yochanan ben (son of) Zakkai had five [primary] students. They were: Rabbi Eliezer ben Hurkenos, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya, Rabbi Yossi the Priest, Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel, and Rabbi Elazar ben Arach."

Mishna 11

"He used to enumerate their praises: Rabbi Eliezer ben Hurkenos is a cemented pit which never loses a drop; Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya - fortunate is she who bore him; Rabbi Yossi the Priest is pious; Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel fears sin; and Rabbi Elazar ben Arach is as an increasing river."

Storing Wine in Metal Vessels



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Berachot. Koren Publishers. Jerusalem.

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Wine cannot be stored in metal vessels because the acid contained in the wine has a somewhat corrosive effect on most metals, including copper and silver. Furthermore, many compounds of these metals are poisonous, which not only spoils the taste of the wine but also places the drinker's health at risk.

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Ta'anit 7a

כְּדֹאמְרָה לִיה בְּרִיתִיה דְּקִיסָר לְרַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן חַנְנִיָּה: אִי, חֲכָמָה מְפֹאָרָה בְּכָלִי מְכוּעָר!
אָמַר לָהּ: אָבִיךָ רַמִּי חֲמָרָא בְּמַנִּי דְּפַתְרָא? אֲמָרָה לִיה: אֵלָא בְּמַאי נִירְמִי? אָמַר לָהּ: אַתּוּן
דְּחֻשְׁבִּיתוּ רְמוּ בְּמַאנִי דְּהָבָא וְכִסְפָּא.

אָזְלָה וְאָמְרָה לִיָּה לְאַבּוּתָהּ. רַמְיָא לְחַמְרָא בְּמִנֵּי דְהַבָּא וְכֶסֶפָא, וְתַקִּי. הִי אֶתּוּ וְאָמְרוּ לִיָּה. אָמַר
לָהּ לְבַרְתִּיָּה: מֵאֵן אָמַר לְךָ הַכִּי? אָמְרָה לִיָּה: רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן חֲנַנְיָהּ. קָרִיּוּהוּ. אָמַר לִיָּה:
אֲמַאי אָמַרְתְּ לָהּ הַכִּי? אָמַר לִיָּה:
כִּי הִכִּי דְאָמְרָה לִי, אָמַרְתְּ לָהּ. וְהָא אִיבָא שְׁפִירֵי דְגַמְרִי!
אִי הוּוּ סָגוּ, טָפִי הוּוּ גַמְרִי.

The daughter of the emperor said to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Ḥananya, who was an ugly man: Woe to glorious wisdom such as yours, which is contained in an ugly vessel!

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Ḥananya said to her: Does your father keep his wine in simple clay vessels?

The emperor's daughter said to him: Rather, in what, then, should he keep it?

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Ḥananya said to her: You, who are so important, should put it in vessels of gold and silver.

The emperor's daughter went and said this to her father. He put the wine in vessels of gold and silver and it turned sour.

When his advisors came and told the emperor that the wine had turned sour, he said to his daughter: Who told you to do this?

His daughter responded: Rabbi Yehoshua ben Ḥananya.

The emperor summoned him and said to him: Why did you say this to her?

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Ḥananya said to him: Just as she said to me, so I said say to her.

The emperor said to him: But there are handsome people who are learned. Rabbi Yehoshua replied: Had they been ugly, they would have been even more learned.



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

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? What is the daughter of the emperor telling us about Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hânanya?

? From the first exchange of words in our story, how can you describe the relationship between the daughter of the emperor and Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hânanya?

Bonus ? Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hânanya advises the daughter of the emperor to place the wine in gold and silver containers to teach her that ugliness preserves wisdom better than beauty. Why doesn't Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hânanya share the teaching directly?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? Why does the Emperor follow his daughter's advice and transfer the wine to vessels of gold and silver?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Why does the Emperor ask his daughter who gave her the advice?

Extra Bonus ? Why do you think that given the same potential, an ugly person will excel more than a handsome/beautiful one?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? What are the privileges of the naturally gifted?

Bonus ? What are the challenges that face the naturally gifted?

Extra Bonus ? What are the advantages of the less naturally gifted when it comes to working towards excellence?

"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from These Texts

A simple story with two lessons:



Don't judge a book by its cover!

! When you push yourself to compensate for what you lack, you will grow up wiser and stronger.



In this somehow amusing story, the Emperor's daughter challenges Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya on two accounts: first she points out that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya doesn't conform with the aesthetic Hellenistic standards, which associate beauty with wisdom. Second, she challenges the Rabbi's patience by calling him an "ugly vessel."

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya transforms the double challenge into a learning opportunity, for the Emperor's daughter and for all of us. Beauty, teaches Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya, not only is not a prerequisite for excellence, but can become a hindrance for it.

While the Emperor's daughter learns this important lesson "the hard" way, the author of our story wants us to learn it the "easy way," by reflecting on its message.