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## Stories with a Twist [260]

### Shebna Wrote a Note and Shot it with an arrow (Insights into Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 26a)



#### Background to Our Story

##### Assyrian siege of Jerusalem



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assyrian\\_siege\\_of\\_Jerusalem](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assyrian_siege_of_Jerusalem)

In approximately 701 BCE, Sennacherib, king of Assyria, attacked the fortified cities of the Kingdom of Judah in a campaign of subjugation. Sennacherib besieged Jerusalem, but failed to capture it — it is the only city mentioned as being besieged on Sennacherib's Stele, of which the capture is not mentioned.

#### Isaiah 22:15-21

<sup>315</sup> *This is what the Lord, the LORD Almighty, says:*

*"Go, say to this steward,  
to Shebna the palace administrator:*

<sup>16</sup> *What are you doing here and who gave you permission  
to cut out a grave for yourself here,  
hewing your grave on the height  
and chiseling your resting place in the rock?*

<sup>17</sup> *"Beware, the LORD is about to take firm hold of you  
and hurl you away, you mighty man.*

<sup>18</sup> *He will roll you up tightly like a ball  
and throw you into a large country.*

*There you will die  
and there the chariots you were so proud of  
will become a disgrace to your master's house.*

<sup>19</sup> *I will depose you from your office,  
and you will be ousted from your position.*

<sup>20</sup> *"In that day I will summon my servant, Eliakim son of Hilkiyah. <sup>21</sup>I will clothe him with your robe and fasten your sash around him and hand your authority over to him. He will be a father to those who live in Jerusalem and to the people of Judah.*



According to the Book of Isaiah, what was Shebna's position?

## Shebna



<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shebna>

Shebna (Hebrew: שֶׁבְנָא) was "treasurer over the house" (meaning [comptroller](#) or governor of the palace) in the reign of king [Hezekiah](#) of [Judah](#), according to the [Hebrew Bible](#). Because of his [pride](#) he was ejected from his office, and replaced by [Eliakim](#) the son of [Hilkiyah](#) as recorded in [Book of Isaiah](#) ([Isaiah 22:15-25](#)). Shebna also appears to have been the leader of the party who favored an alliance with [Egypt](#) against Assyria

## King Hezekiah



<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hezekiah>

Hezekiah (Hebrew: הִזְקִיָּהוּ) was, according to the Hebrew Bible, the son of Ahaz and the 13th king of Judah. Edwin Thiele concluded that his reign was between c. 715 and 686 BCE. He is considered a very righteous king by the author of the Books of Kings. He is also one of the most prominent kings of Judah mentioned in the Bible. According to the Bible, Hezekiah witnessed the destruction of the northern Kingdom of Israel by Sargon's Assyrians in c. 722 BCE and was king of Judah during the siege of Jerusalem by Sennacherib in 701 BC. Hezekiah enacted sweeping religious reforms, including a strict mandate for the sole worship of Yahweh and a prohibition on venerating other deities within the Temple of Jerusalem. Isaiah and Micah prophesied during his reign.

## Prophet Isaiah



<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isaiah>

The first verse of the Book of Isaiah states that Isaiah prophesied during the reigns of [Uzziah](#) (or Azariah), [Jotham](#), [Ahaz](#), and [Hezekiah](#), the kings of [Judah](#) ([Isaiah 1:1](#)). Uzziah's reign was 52 years in the middle of the 8th century BCE, and Isaiah must have begun his ministry a few years before Uzziah's death, probably in the [740s BCE](#). Isaiah lived until the fourteenth year of Hezekiah's reign (who died [698 BCE](#)). He may have been contemporary for some years with [Manasseh](#). Thus Isaiah may have prophesied for as long as 64 years.

So long as Ahaz reigned, the kingdom of Judah was untouched by the Assyrian power. But when Hezekiah gained the throne, he was encouraged to rebel "against the king of Assyria" ([2 Kings 18:7](#)), and entered into an alliance with the king of [Egypt](#) ([Isaiah 30:2-4](#)). The king of Assyria threatened the king of Judah, and at length invaded the land. [Sennacherib](#) ([701 BC](#)) led a powerful army into Judah. Hezekiah was reduced to despair, and submitted to the Assyrians ([2 Kings 18:14-16](#)). But after a brief interval, war broke out again. Again Sennacherib led an army into Judah, one detachment of which threatened Jerusalem ([Isaiah](#)

[36:2-22](#); [37:8](#)). Isaiah on that occasion encouraged Hezekiah to resist the Assyrians ([37:1-7](#)).

According to the account in 2 Kings 19 (and its derivative account in 2 Chronicles 32) an angel of God fell on the Assyrian army and 185,000 of its men were killed in one night. Sennacherib never recovered from the shock of the disaster in Judah. He made no more expeditions against either the Southern Levant or Egypt.

The remaining years of Hezekiah's reign were peaceful (2 Chr 32:23-29). Isaiah probably lived to its close, and possibly into the reign of Manasseh. The time and manner of his death are not specified in either the Bible or other primary sources. The Talmud [Yevamot 49b] says that he suffered martyrdom by being sawn in two under the orders of Manasseh. According to rabbinic literature, Isaiah was the maternal grandfather of Manasseh.

## The Text: Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 26a

שְׁבִנָּא הוּא דְרִישׁ בְּתֵלְסַר רַבּוּתָא. תְּזַקְתָּה הוּא דְרִישׁ בְּחַד סַךְ רַבּוּתָא .

פִּי אַתָּא סְנַחֲרִיב וְצַר עָלָה דִירוּשְׁלַיִם, כְּתֵב שְׁבִנָּא פִתְקָא, שְׂדָא בְּגִירָא: "שְׁבִנָּא וְסִיעֵתוֹ הַשְּׁלִימוֹ;  
תְּזַקְתָּה וְסִיעֵתוֹ לֹא הַשְּׁלִימוֹ". שְׁנַאֲמַר: "כִּי הִנֵּה הָרְשָׁעִים יִדְרָכוּן קִשְׁת כּוֹנְנֵי חֶצֶם עַל יָתֵר".

הוּא קָא מְסַתְפֵי תְזַקְתָּה. אָמַר: דִּילְמָא, חַס וְשְׁלוֹם, נְטִיָה דְעֵתִיָה דְקוּדְשָׁא בְרִיָהּ הוּא בְּתַר רַיבָּא, כִּיּוֹן  
דְרוּבָא מִימְסָרִי, אִינְהוּ נְמִי מִימְסָרִי. בָּא נְבִיא וְאָמַר לוֹ: "לֹא תֵאמְרוּן קִשְׁר לְכָל אֲשֶׁר יֹאמַר הָעָם  
הַזֶּה קִשְׁר". כְּלוּמַר: קִשְׁר רְשָׁעִים הוּא, וְקִשְׁר רְשָׁעִים אִינוּ מִן הַמְּנִינִן.

הֲלֹךְ לְחֶצֶב לֹךְ קֶבֶר בְּקֶבְרֵי בֵית דָּוִד. בָּא נְבִיא וְאָמַר לוֹ: "מַה לָּךְ פַּה וּמִי לָךְ פַּה, כִּי חֲצַבְתָּ לָךְ פַּה  
קֶבֶר? הִנֵּה הִ' מַטְלֵטְלָה טַלְטְלָה גְבֵר"

....

"צִנּוּף יִצְנַפֵּף צִנּוּפָה כְּדוּר אֶל אֶרֶץ רַחֲבַת יָדַיִם" וְגו'. תְּנַא: הוּא בִיקֶשׁ קֶלּוֹן בֵּית אֲדֹנָיו – לְפִיכָף  
נְהַפֵּף כְּבוֹדוֹ לְקֶלּוֹן

כִּי הָוָה נִפְיָק אִיהוּ, אַתָּא גְבַרִיאֵל אַחַדְיָה לְדִשָׁא בְּאִפֵּי מִשׁ רִינִיתִיָה :  
אָמְרוּ לִיָה: מִשִּׁירִיתָךְ הִיכָא? אָמַר: הֲדָרוּ בֵי. אָמְרוּ לִיָה: אִם כֵּן, אַחֻכֵי קָא מְחִיבְתָּ בְּנִי! נְקַבּוּהוּ  
בְּעַקְבֵי וְתִלְאוּהוּ בְּזַנְבֵי סוּסִיָהֶם וְהִיוּ מְגַרְרִין אוֹתוֹ עַל הַקּוּצִיִם וְעַל הַבְּרַקְנִין

Shebna would teach Torah to an audience of 130,000 followers, whereas King Hezekiah would teach Torah to an audience of merely 110,000 followers.

When Sennacherib came and besieged Jerusalem, Shebna wrote a note and shot it over the wall with an arrow. It read: Shebna and his camp have appeased Sennacherib and are ready to surrender; Hezekiah and his camp have not appeased Sennacherib. As it is stated in alluding to this incident: "*For behold, the wicked*

*bend the bow, they have made ready their arrow upon the string" (Psalms 11:2).*

Hezekiah was afraid. He said: Perhaps, God forbid, the opinion of the Holy One, Blessed be He, will follow the majority; and since the majority have submitted to the Assyrians, even those who have not submitted will also be delivered into their hands. The prophet Isaiah then came and said to him: *"Say not: A conspiracy, concerning all of which this people say: A conspiracy" (Isaiah 8:12).* Meaning, it is a conspiracy of wicked people, and a conspiracy of wicked people is not counted. Therefore, although they are many, they are not considered the majority.

Shebna went to carve out a grave for himself among the graves of the house of David, as he thought that the kingship would be given to him. The prophet Isaiah then came and said to him: *"What have you here, and whom have you here, that you have carved out a grave for yourself here? You, who have carved yourself out a grave on high, and hollowed a habitation for yourself in the rock? Behold, the Lord will make you wander like the wandering of a man; and he will wind you round and round" (Isaiah 22:16–17).*

....

*"He will violently roll and toss you like a ball into a large country; there you shall die, and there shall be the chariots of your glory, with shame of your lord's house" (Isaiah 22:18).* A *baraita* taught: He, Shebna, desired shame for his master's house; therefore, his glory turned to shame.

This is what happened to him: When he was going out of the gate of Jerusalem to submit to the Assyrians, the angel Gabriel came and held the gate in front of his camp so they could not follow him.

Consequently, he went out by himself. The Assyrians said to him: Where is your camp?

Shebna said: They backed out on me. They said to him: If so, you are mocking us; you led us to believe that behind you stands a large camp of supporters.

They punched holes in his heels and hung him by the tails of their horses, and dragged him on the thorns and on the bristles.



**Explaining the Story** - What's going on in our story? (The sequence of events)

### **Comprehension and Analysis Questions**

**?** According to our story, what was Shebna's greatness?

**?** What was written in the note Shebna shot to Sennacherib?

**?** *"Shebna and his camp have appeased Sennacherib and are ready to surrender; Hezekiah and his camp have not appeased Sennacherib."* Who was "Shebna's camp"? Who was "Hezekiah's camp"?

**?** What makes Shebna believe that he is "made for bigger things"?

**?** What was King Hezekiah's concern?

**Extra Bonus ?** What was Shebna's altruistic plan when he shot a note to Sennacherib?

**Extra Bonus ?** What was Shebna's less altruistic plan when he shot a note to Sennacherib?

**?** How did it happen that Shebna was disgraced?

**Extra Bonus ?** Why was Shebna disgraced?

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

**!** Arrogance and betrayal: A disastrous recipe which won't get you very far.

# epilogue

According to the biblical story, Shebna is a very high officer, only second to the king himself. According to our Talmudic story, he is a great Torah scholar as well. When Shebna sees his popularity rising, he plans to betray the king by defecting to the enemy. His motivation, as we soon see, is not to save the nation or to provide a better alternative to King Hezekiah's action plan, but to gain the favor of the enemy in order to usurp the throne. While everybody is busy trying to survive the siege, he is busy carving out for himself a grave among the graves of the house of David, counting on the success of his plot.

While Shebna's demise comes through the miraculous intervention of the Angel Gabriel, the message of our story is anything but supernatural: arrogance and betrayal won't get you very far and will lead you through a path of shame, alienation, and loneliness.