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## Stories with a Twist [325]

### Rabbi Yehoshua Went and Stood the Emperor Facing the Sun

Insights into Babylonian Talmud, Hulin 59b



Taught on the day of the solar eclipse - April 4, 2024

#### Background to Our Story

##### Exodus 33:17-21

<sup>17</sup> And the LORD said to Moses, "I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name."

<sup>18</sup> Then Moses said, "Now show me your glory."

<sup>19</sup> And the LORD said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. <sup>20</sup> But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live."

<sup>21</sup> Then the LORD said, "There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. <sup>22</sup> When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. <sup>23</sup> Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen."

#### Rabbi Yehoshua



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Sukkah. Koren publishers Jerusalem.

Page 200

This is Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya the Levite, one of the leading Sages in the generation following the destruction of the Second Temple. He served as one of the Levite singers in the Temple. After its destruction, he was among the students who followed their primary teacher, Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai, to Yavne. Rabbi Yehoshua lived a life of poverty, working as a blacksmith, and was recognized by all as one of the leading Torah authorities. While he disagreed with Rabban Gamliel's rulings on several occasions, he ultimately accepted the authority of the *Nasi*. After Rabban Gamliel's death, he served as a leader of the Sages.

## The Text: Babylonian Talmud Hulin 59b

אמר ליה קיסר לר' יהושע בן חנניה בעינא דאיתחי לאלהיכו א"ל לא מצית תזית ליה א"ל איברא תזינא ליה  
אזל אוקמיה להדי יומא בתקופת תמוז א"ל איסתכל ביה א"ל לא מצינא א"ל יומא דחד משמשי דקיימי קמי דקודשא בריך הוא אמרת לא מצינא לאיסתכלא ביה שכינה לא כל שכן.

The emperor said to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Ḥananya: I wish to see your God.

Rabbi Yehoshua said to him: You cannot see Him. The emperor said to him: Truly, I wish to see Him.

[Rabbi Yehoshua] went and stood the emperor facing the sun in the season of Tammuz, i.e., summer. [Rabbi Yehoshua] said to him: Look at it.

The emperor said to him: I cannot.

[Rabbi Yehoshua] said to him: Now, if with regard to the sun, which is only one of the servants that stand before the Holy One, Blessed be He, you say: I cannot look at it, is it not all the more so with regard to the Divine Presence?



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

### Comprehension and Analysis Questions

**Bonus ?** Why did the emperor say to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Ḥananya: "I wish to see your God"?

Answer 1

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Answer 2

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Answer 3

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Answer 4

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**?** Why did Rabbi Yehoshua tell the emperor he could not see God?

**?** Why did the emperor insist? Why did he use the expression: “Truly, I wish to see Him”?

**Bonus ?** Why didn’t Rabbi Yehoshua explain to the emperor that even Moses couldn’t see God?

Answer 1

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Answer 2

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**Bonus ?** What was Rabbi Yehoshua’s goal by standing the emperor facing the sun in the season of Tamuz (Summer)?

**Extra Bonus ?** Can you think of a way in which the emperor was able “to see” God in our story?

### **“The Twist” – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from This Text.**

**!** Grasping God: You can only grasp when you are able to grasp that you cannot grasp!



Our short story begins with an arrogant emperor that demands to see the God of Israel. Rabbi Yehoshua understands that the emperor needs a lesson in humility. Paradoxically, if the emperor were to embrace his own powerlessness and smallness, he would be able to find God in his own sense of humility. The end of our story remains open, hinting that, at the end of the day, it is up to the emperor -and each of us- to make ourselves smaller to allow for God’s presence to shine.

# The Face of God

A Rereading of Our Story

<https://eartstohear.wordpress.com/2015/03/27/the-face-of-god>



Rabbi Joshua Ben Hananiah had a peculiar relationship with the Roman Emperor Hadrian. Rabbi Joshua would often go to Hadrian's court to advocate for the rights of his people against oppressive policies. Hadrian was not used to being talked to quite so boldly, but he tolerated it. In fact, he enjoyed these visits because he liked to make sport of trying to stump the Rabbi with questions about his religion. Occasionally, Hadrian called Rabbi Joshua to his court for the sole purpose of questioning him.

One such day, Hadrian summoned Rabbi Joshua to his court. There in the room he had three statues depicting the Roman gods. He said to Rabbi Joshua, "These are the statues of but a few of our gods. We have many more. Look at their faces! This one, Venus, has a beautiful face that her devotees worship out of love. This one, Mars, has a terrible face that his devotees worship out of fear. And this one, Jupiter, has a regal face that his devotees worship out of respect. The face of a god tells its worshipers who it is. Tell me... what is the face of your god like?"

Rabbi Joshua dutifully responded, "The Torah teaches that no one can see the face of The Lord and yet live. We Jews worship the unseen God."

Hadrian laughed. "How can you worship a god whose face you cannot even see?"

"Follow me," said Rabbi Joshua, "and I will give you an answer."

So, the Emperor, enjoying having fun at the Rabbi's expense, obliged him and followed him out into the courtyard. It was a hot summer day and the sun was shining very brightly. Rabbi Joshua said to him, "If you want to see the face of God, you must stare directly into the sun."

Hadrian's mood suddenly changed. "You fool," he shouted, "You know very well I cannot look directly into the sun! Do you scheme to make your emperor blind?"

“Of course you cannot stare into the sun,” said Rabbi Joshua calmly, “but the sun is only a servant of our God. If you cannot behold the splendor of one of His servants, how could you possibly hope to gaze upon the face of God?”

Hadrian was speechless. He had once again been outwitted. Without a word, Rabbi Joshua departed to go back to his people and join them in their worship of an unseen God.