

From the Rabbi's Desk  
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**Stories with a Twist**  
**[331]**

**And Joseph Heard and Was Silent.**  
Insights into Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 39



Bacchiacca (1494–1557): Joseph receives his brothers on their Second Visit to Egypt. The National Gallery, London

**Background to Our Story (What you need to know to better understand the story)**

**Genesis 6:3**

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה לֹא יֵדוּן רוּחִי בָאָדָם לְעֹלָם בְּשָׂגֶם הוּא בָשָׂר וְהָיָה יָמָיו מֵאָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה:

And the Lord Said: My spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh; his days shall be one hundred and twenty years.”—

**Genesis 50:24:26**

וַיָּמָת יוֹסֵף בֶּן־מֵאָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנִים וַיַּחַנְטוּ אֹתוֹ וַיִּשָּׂם בְּאֵרוֹן בְּמִצְרַיִם:

Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years; and he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt.

**Genesis 43:28**

וַיֹּאמְרוּ שְׁלוֹם לְעַבְדְּךָ לְאֲבִינוֹ עוֹדְנוּ הֵן וַיִּקְדוּ (וישתחוּ) וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ:

They replied, “It is well with your servant our father; he is still in good health.” And they bowed down, prostrating themselves before him.

**Genesis 44:24**

וַיְהִי כִּי עָלִינוּ אֶל־עַבְדְּךָ אָבִי וַנְּגִידֵלּוֹ אֵת דְּבָרֵי אֲדֹנָי:

When we came back to your servant my father, we reported my lord’s words to him.

**Genesis 44:27**

וַיֹּאמֶר עַבְדְּךָ אָבִי אֵלֵינוּ אַתֶּם יַדְעֶתֶם כִּי שְׁנַיִם יָלְדָה־לִּי אִשְׁתִּי:

Your servant my father said to us, ‘As you know, my wife bore me two sons.

**Genesis 44:30**

וְעַתָּה כִּבְּאִי אֶל־עַבְדְּךָ אָבִי וְהַנֶּעַר אֵינָנוּ וְנִפְשׁוֹ קְשׁוּרָה בְּנַפְשׁוֹ:

“Now, if I come to your servant my father and the boy is not with us—since his own life is so bound up with his—

**Genesis 44:31**

וְהָיָה כִּרְאוּתוֹ כִּי־אֵין הַנֶּעַר וּמָת וְהוֹרִידוּ עַבְדֶּיךָ אֶת־שֵׁיבַת עַבְדְּךָ אֲבִינוֹ בְּגֹזוֹ שְׂאֵלָה:

...when he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die, and your servants will send the white head of your servant our father down to Sheol in grief.

## The Text: Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 39

רבי ישמעאל אומר: עשרה פעמים אמרו בני יעקב ליוסף "עבדך אבינו", ושמע יוסף ושתק, ושתיקה כהודאה דמייא. לפיכך נתקצרו מחייו עשרה שנים.

Rabbi Ishmael said: Ten times did the sons of Jacob say to Joseph, "your servant, our father." And Joseph heard and was silent; and silence gives consent; therefore, were ten years deducted from his life.



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

### Comprehension and Analysis Questions

**?** From where does Rabbi Ishmael learn that Joseph's life was cut short by 10 years?

**?** After reading the background to our short story, and the story itself, what is the problem with Rabbi Ishmael's statement? Can you think of a possible solution to the problem?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

וצ"ב שלא אמרו כ"א ה' פעמים.

[ואולי שמע פעמים ע"י מתורכמן, [שו"ת זכרון יוסף בשם אשתו, ויש בשם הגר"א, ור"ר יהונן]

And this needs an explanation, since the brothers did mention *your servant, our father* only 5 times (and not 10); and perhaps (a possible answer is that) he (Joseph) heard 10 times through the interpreter (Responsa Zichron Yosef in the name of his wife, and they are those who bring this in the name of the Vilna Gaon).

**?** Why do you think Joseph heard and was silent?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

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



Silence always gives consent, even if you have a way to justify it.



We are not sure why Joseph remained silent after hearing his brothers refer to his father as "your servant, our father." Maybe he felt he was not actively demeaning his father, or perhaps he believed the time was not ready yet to reveal himself to his brothers. Regardless of Joseph's motives, our Sages are critical of him, reminding us that silence is never neutral and always gives consent.