

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [332]

For What Reason Did Joseph Predecease His Brothers? Insights into Babylonian Talmud Sota 13b



Lavers & Westlake / Joseph dies in Egypt / Stained glass / late 1890s

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

Genesis 50:24:26

וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל-אֶחָיו אֲנֹכִי מֵת וְאֱלֹהִים פִּקְדוֹ יִפְקֹד אֶתְכֶם וְהֵעֲלָה אֶתְכֶם מִן-הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וְלַיַּעֲקֹב: וַיִּשְׁבַּע יוֹסֵף אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר פִּקְדוֹ יִפְקֹד אֱלֹהִים אֶתְכֶם וְהֵעֲלֶתֶם אֹתִי-עַצְמוֹתַי מִצִּיפֹת מִצְרָיִם: וַיָּמָת יוֹסֵף בְּרִמְמָה וַעֲשׂוֹר שְׁנַיִם וַיַּחַנְטוּ אֹתוֹ וַיִּישָׂם בְּאֲרוֹן בְּמִצְרָיִם:

At length, Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die. God will surely take notice of you and bring you up from this land to the land promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." So Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, "When God has taken notice of you, you shall carry up my bones from here." Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years; and he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt.

Lordly



exhibiting the pride and assurance associated with one of the highest birth or rank.

Having a feeling of superiority that shows itself in an overbearing attitude. *One dinner guest was a little lordly about her status as a vegetarian, even asking the other diners how they could bear to eat dead animals.*

Babylonian Talmud 87b

אמר רבי יוחנן: אוי לה לרבנות שמקבצת את בעליה

Rabbi Yohanan said: Woe to authority, which shortens the life and buries its holders.

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Sota 13b

ואמר רב יהודה אמר רב, ואיתימא רבי חמא ברבי חנינא: מפני מה מת יוסף קודם לאחיו? מפני שהנהיג עצמו ברבנות.

And Rav Yehuda says that Rav says, and some say that this was said by Rabbi Hama, son of Rabbi Hanina: For what reason did Joseph predecease his brothers, as is indicated from his requesting of them to take care of his burial needs?

Because he [Joseph] acted lordly.



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

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? How can acting lordly shorten your years?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Extra Bonus ? The word רַבְנוּת can be translated as “position of authority,” “lordliness,” and “arrogance.” Can you see a connection or common denominator between these different definitions?

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

! Beware: Act lordly and/or accept position of authority at your own risk!



At *prima facie* our very short story (more like a statement, really) is about Joseph being punished for acting lordly and arrogantly. A deeper analysis, however, invites us to explore the connection between positions of authority, arrogance, and lordliness.

Can positions of authority lead to arrogance and lordliness, or is a modicum of arrogance and lordliness necessary for a person to attain a position of authority? Is there a connection between positions of authority and poor health, or shortening of life?

Finally, the word רַבְנוּת is the modern Hebrew word for rabbinate (the office or tenure of a rabbi). There is a lot of research on how clergy are affected by

obesity, mental illness, and poor general health, echoing the statement of Rabbi Yohanan that the רבנות has the potential of shortening the life of its holders.

Appendix I

Selection of articles on clergy affected by mental illness, obesity, and poor general health.

Clergy More Likely to Suffer from Depression, Anxiety

<https://today.duke.edu/2013/08/clergydepressionnewsrelease>

Clergy Members Suffer from Burnout, Poor Health

<https://www.npr.org/2010/08/03/128957149/clergy-members-suffer-from-burnout-poor-health>

Clergy Health A Review of Literature

https://www.wespath.org/assets/1/7/FTL_Clergy_Health_Lit_Rev.pdf

For American clergy, the burdens of their calling increasingly threaten mental well-being

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2024/05/26/clergy-mental-health-struggles-workload-political-climate/73706621007/>

Prevalence of obesity in religious clergy in the United States: A systematic review and meta-analysis

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/38572610/>

Appendix II

Mishna Avot 1:10

שְׁמַעִיָּה וְאַבְטַלְיוֹן קִבְּלוּ מֵהֶם. שְׁמַעִיָּה אָמַר, אָהַב אֶת הַמְּלָאכָה, וְשָׂנֵא אֶת הַרְבֵּנוּת, וְאֵל תִּתְּוֹדַע לְרִשׁוּת:

Shemaiah and Abtalion received [the oral tradition] from them. Shemaiah used to say: love work, hate the רבנות, and do not attempt to draw near to the ruling authority.

- hate acting the superior
- hate positions of authority
- hate haughtiness
- hate lordliness
- hate mastery

Maimonides on Mishna Avot 1:10

"*hate Rabbanut*" - he will have trials and evils in this world. For since people will be jealous of him and will argue against him, he will lose his emunah (faith) as they said: "one who is appointed as a leader of the public becomes wicked (power corrupts)".

Rabbi Avraham Azoulai on Mishna Avot 1:10

Rabbi Avraham Azoulai - Ahava b'Taanugim human society is generally divided into three divisions. This is besides the special "solitary ones" (mitbodedim) who toil in wisdom and are above everyone and who have no occupation with other people.

The first division comprises all the various workers and businessmen in the world, whose intent is to work to earn money.

The second division is the leaders and judges of the people, each generation and its leaders, judges, etc.

The third division is those who have power to be in the palace of the king and the officials who are close to the government.

Regarding the first division, he said it is the choicest of the three and it is proper to love this [path] for it is the best one for man to toil in.

Regarding the second division, he said it is proper to hate it. But it is not proper to distance from it totally. For sometimes necessity brings one to become a judge or a leader, namely, when there is no one there more fit than himself. Then it is not proper to distance from it. All [important] positions and leadership (minui v'hanhaga) are included in the term "Rabanut". (as written in Avodah Zara 17b: "rabbi (master) of weavers".

This is the meaning of "hate Rabbanut".

Regarding the third division, he said: "do not become known (intimate) with the ruling power". Avoid it completely. For there is no benefit. Only evil all day.

He said "love work", and not "engage in work", i.e. habituate yourself until the work becomes second nature and it is not a heavy yoke on you.

He did not say "love the earnings of work", but rather "love work", even if you have money and don't need the earnings. For as the talmud says: "idleness brings to shiamum (mental instability) and immorality" (Ketuvot 59b).

Also hate Rabanut for in this, man becomes haughty and haughtiness brings to sin and perhaps he will sin. All the more so "do not become known (intimate) with the ruling power". For with the "ruling power" certainly he will sin. Because the reshut wants only someone who flatters it and brings it benefits and he will sometimes take other people's money wrongly.

Tiferet Yisrael on Mishna Avot 1:10

If nevertheless you were appointed a Rav, at least hate to be lording over your flock. Lead them with mercy as a father to his sons, not like a master ruling over his slaves. For you were not appointed for that, and like Rabban Gamliel said:

"Do you imagine that I am granting you authority? I am granting you servitude, as it is stated: 'And they spoke to him saying: If you will be a servant to this people today' (I Kings 12:7)" (Horayot 10a).

Whoever becomes haughty is as one who worships idols (Sotah 4), and for a leader who becomes haughty over his congregation, his sin is very great before G-d (Rosh Hashana 17a). And all the troubles and anger he causes is guarded for him. This is what our sages said: "Rabbanut buries its possessor" (Yomah 86b), i.e. lording of the Rav will bury him despite his physical health, his honor, his intellect, his righteousness - all of them will melt away with him.