

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [55]

Why Should I be Ashamed of My Deeds? Insights into Genesis Rabbah 100:2

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Background to Our Story

Rabbi Yoĥanan



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Berakhot. Koren publishers Jerusalem.
Page 28.

This is Rabbi Yoĥanan bar Nappaĥa, one of the greatest *amora'im*, whose teachings are fundamental components of both the Babylonian and the Jerusalem Talmud. He resided in Tiberias and lived to an advanced age. Almost nothing is known of his family origins. He was orphaned at a young age and, although his family apparently owned considerable property, he spent virtually all of his resources in his devotion to the study of Torah, and he eventually became impoverished. In his youth, he had the privilege of studying under Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, the redactor of the Mishna, but most of his Torah learning was accomplished under Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi's students: Ĥizkiya ben Ĥiyya, Rabbi Oshaya, Rabbi Ĥanina, and Rabbi Yannai, who lavished praise upon him. In time, he became the head of the yeshiva in Tiberias, at which point his fame and influence increased greatly. For a long time, Rabbi Yoĥanan was the leading rabbinic scholar in the entire Jewish world; not only in Eretz Yisrael, but in Babylonia, as well, where he was respected by the Babylonian Sages. Many of them ascended to Eretz Yisrael and became his outstanding students. He was a master of both *halakha* and *aggada*, his teachings in both disciplines are found throughout both of the Talmuds. In recognition of his intellectual and spiritual stature, the *halakha* is ruled in accordance with his opinion in almost every case, even when Rav or Shmuel, the preeminent *amora'im* of Babylonia, whom he treated deferentially, disagree with him. Only in disputes with his teachers in Eretz Yisrael, such as Rabbi Yannai and Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, is the *halakha* not ruled in

accordance with his opinion. Rabbi Yoĥanan was renowned for being handsome, and much was said in praise of his good looks. We know that his life was full of suffering. Ten of his sons died in his lifetime. There is a geonic tradition that one of his sons, Rabbi Mattana, a Babylonian *amora*, did not predecease him. The death of Rabbi Yoĥanan's disciple colleague and brother-in-law, Reish Lakish, for which he considered himself responsible, hastened his own death. Rabbi Yoĥanan had many students. In fact, all of the *amora'im* of Eretz Yisrael in succeeding generations were his students and benefited from his teachings, to the extent that he is considered the author of the Jerusalem Talmud. His greatest students were his brother-in-law Reish Lakish, Rabbi Elazar, Rabbi Ĥiyya bar Abba, Rabbi Abbahu, Rabbi Yosei bar Ĥanina, Rabbi Ami, and Rabbi Asi.

Rabbi Josiah/ Yoshiyah – רבי יאשיה

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/>

Josiah (third century C.E.), Palestinian *amora*. Josiah was a pupil of Rabbi Johanan, in whose name he transmitted teachings (Jerusalem Talmud, Kilaim 9:4, 32b; Babylonian Talmud Ḥulin 128a). He also studied under Rabbi Kahana (Jerusalem Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 1:1, 56d), who upon his death ordered that part of his legacy be given to Josiah (Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin. 3:9, 21d; cf. Genesis Rabbah ed. by Theodor and Ḥ. Albeck (19652) 53n. 1).

A number of *amoraim* with the name Josiah are mentioned in the Talmud, and it is possible that one of them, Josiah of Usha (Babylonian Talmud Gittin 33b), is the same as this Josiah.

See: Heinemann, Toledot, 531f.; Frankel, Mevo, 90b, 109b; Ḥ. Albeck, Mavo la-Talmudim (1969), 243.

Jewish Funeral Customs: Linen Shrouds

<http://www.faqs.org>



The body is clothed in a white linen shroud and not street clothes. Shrouds are sewn without knots, and are a multiple piece garment. In earlier times, the sisterhoods or women's auxiliaries used to make shrouds for their community; this practice may still occur in traditional communities. Today, virtually all (Jewish) mortuaries carry shrouds, the prices vary. This is done because of a rabbinic decree of around 1800 years ago. People were spending more than they could afford on funeral expenses because no one wanted to show the deceased, typically a parent, less honor than others showed their loved ones. So, Rabban Gamliel, the "prince" of the Jewish community of the time (and therefore his estate would be quite wealthy), demanded that he be buried in simple white linen, and that this become the custom for everyone. He patterned this clothing after that worn by the High Priest in the Temple on Yom Kippur. If G-d asks the High Priest to enter the Holy of Holies and confront the Divine Presence in simple white linen garments, it seems fitting to do the same when preparing someone to meet their Maker. To this very day, we bury people in a

hat, shirt (kittel), pants, belt -- all of plain white linen, if a man, his tallis, and simplified (and ritualized) shoes. No pockets, since you can't take it with you. And the belt isn't knotted, for Kabbalistic reasons.

The Text: Genesis Rabbah 100:2

Rabbi Yochanan gave instructions before his death saying, "Dress me neither with white shrouds nor with black shrouds, but with bluish shrouds. That way, if i am summoned to be with the righteous at the time of the resurrection of the dead, the wicked will not recognize me as one of their own, and if i am summoned to be with the wicked, then the righteous will not recognize me as one of theirs."

Rabbi Yoshiyah gave instructions before his death saying, "Dress me for burial with pressed white clothes."

They said to [Rabbi Yoshiyah], "Your teacher, Rabbi Yochanan, said like that (i.e. he said otherwise), and yet you say like this?!"

He [Rabbi Yoshiyah] replied to them, "Why should I be embarrassed before God by my deeds?"



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

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? What do the colors white and black symbolize in our story?

Bonus ? What do you think prompted Rabbi Yochanan's singular request?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? Why was Rabbi Yoshiyah expected to follow the example of Rabbi Yochanan?

Bonus ? When asked why he departed from his teacher's instructions, Rabbi Yoshiyah replied: "Why should I be embarrassed by my deeds?" What did Rabbi Yoshiyah mean by his reply?

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

! “Why should I be embarrassed by my deeds?” - Living your life Rabbi Yoshiyah’s way!



Our short story belongs to a compilation of instructions by leading sages on how to handle their funeral arrangements.

Assuming that the death will be resuscitated with the clothes they were buried with, Rabbi Yochanan, the leading rabbi of his generation, gives instructions to be buried neither in black nor in white shrouds, but rather in a color in between. As readers we are not sure what compelled Rabbi Yochanan to give this particular instruction. Was it the insecurity of not knowing if he belonged with the righteous or the wicked, or was true humility of not wanting to take his place with the righteous for granted? Since Rabbi Yochanan is addressing his students, perhaps we can contemplate the possibility of a modicum of false modesty in his instructions.

Rabbi Yochanan’s instructions are contrasted with the ones of one of his disciples, Rabbi Yoshiyah, who gives instructions to be buried in white garments, not necessarily out of arrogance or self confidence in his merits, but out of the realization that he lived a righteous life to the best of his abilities.

Rabbi Yoshiyah knows he is not perfect, but he “owns” his deeds and when he looks himself in the mirror of life, he likes what he sees.

At the end of the day, our story is not about shrouds, but about living our lives in a way that when our time to depart this world comes, we can look back with pride, and forward with confidence.