

Rabbi Yehoshua and the Wine Vessel

An Old Folktale

A long time ago, there lived a very wise rabbi named Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiah. He lived in Israel in the second century.

One day, he met the emperor's daughter. She looked at him and said, "Everyone says that you are very smart, but you look ugly to me."

Rabbi Yehoshua wanted to show her that appearance did not matter, so he asked her,

"In what kind of vessels does your father, the rich emperor, store his excellent wine?"

"In pottery," she answered.

Rabbi Yehoshua continued, "But all people, even the poor, keep wine in earthen vessels, which are simple and unattractive! Your father is a very rich emperor, and it is not suitable for him to store excellent wine in such plain pottery. I suggest that he put the wine in expensive vessels—made of silver and gold—to befit a wealthy emperor like him."

The emperor's daughter thought for a moment and agreed with the rabbi. "You are right! I will go to my father and tell him to store the excellent wine in excellent vessels—made of silver and gold."

So, she did. She went to her father, the rich emperor.

"Father, it is not appropriate for you to use pottery. You are rich, so you should store the wine in silver and gold vessels!"

"You are right, my daughter!" said the emperor, pleased with her concern for him.

After a short time, during a festive meal, they brought out a beautiful gold vessel and poured wine for the guests. Oh my! The wine had gone bad!

Everyone sniffed and scrunched up their noses. The emperor was furious. He realized that the gold vessel had caused the wine to spoil.

He turned to his daughter and asked, “Who told you to put the wine in silver and gold vessels?”

“It was Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiah who suggested it,” she answered.

“Bring him here!” commanded the emperor.

When Rabbi Yehoshua arrived, the emperor asked, “Why did you tell my daughter to put all the wine in silver and gold vessels? You knew it would go bad, didn’t you?”

Rabbi Yehoshua looked at the emperor and began to explain, “Your daughter said that I am wise but ugly. This was a lesson for her. Not everything that is beautiful on the outside contains beautiful things inside, and not everything that is unattractive on the outside contains ugliness within. Gold may be beautiful, but it is a metal and cannot preserve wine like simple, unassuming pottery.

“Just as your excellent wine, Your Highness, must be stored in plain and humble vessels, so too is my wisdom kept within a simple and unremarkable body.”

