

From the Rabbi's Desk  
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## Stories with a Twist [216]



### “To What is the Matter Analogous?”

Insights into Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 108a

#### Background to Our Story

##### Johanan bar Nappaha



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johanan\\_bar\\_Nappaha](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johanan_bar_Nappaha)

Johanan bar Nappaha ([Hebrew](#): יוחנן בר נפחא) (lived 180–279 CE) was a [rabbi](#) in the early era of the [Talmud](#). He was born in [Sepphoris](#) in the [Roman-ruled Galilee](#) (then part of [Syria Palaestina](#) province). His father, a blacksmith, died prior to his birth, and his mother died soon after; he was raised by his grandfather in Sepphoris.

[Judah the Prince](#) (Yehudah Ha-Nasi) took the boy under his wing and taught him [Torah](#). Due to the disparity in ages, though — Johanan was only fifteen years old when Rabbi Yehudah died — Johanan was not one of Yehuda's prime students; rather, he studied more under Rabbi Yehudah's students. It is said that he sat seventeen rows behind [Rav](#) (Abba Arikha) in the school taught by Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Nasi. He studied Torah diligently all his life, even selling a field house and an olive shed that he had inherited from his parents in order to be able to devote his time to study; after that was spent, he lived a life of poverty. When the time came to start teaching Torah, Johanan decided to move from Sepphoris to [Tiberias](#), so as not to show disrespect to great rabbis in Sepphoris who did not have their own centers of Torah study. He was considered, however, the greatest rabbi in the [Land of Israel](#), and was even esteemed in the other center of Rabbinical [Judaism](#), [Babylonia](#) — so much so that after the deaths of [Abba Arikha](#) and [Samuel of Nehardea](#) in Babylonia, Johanan was considered by Babylonian Jews as the greatest rabbi of the generation. He started a school in [Tiberias](#), and let anybody in if they wanted to learn, a controversial move at the time. He laid the foundations for the Yerushalmi ([Jerusalem Talmud](#)). He cites many traditions relating to the destruction of the [Second Temple](#).

His colleague, [Shimon ben Lakish](#), was also his brother-in-law. Johanan's method in deciding [halakha](#) was to establish broad rules that apply in many cases; for example, he held that the halakha always follows a s'tam Mishnah (an undisputed [anonymous mishnah](#)),

and he had rules for which [tanna](#) ("Mishnah teacher") to follow in cases of dispute. He is believed to have never left [Palestine](#) in all his life, a rare feat for rabbis in those days, who frequently visited [Babylonia](#). Johanan was known for being fat and of a goodly countenance and reportedly lived more than one hundred years. The Talmud relates of him: "He that wishes to see the beauty of Rabbi Johanan, let him bring a silver chalice when it comes out of the silversmith's refinery, and let him fill it with the red kernels of a pomegranate, and then let him adorn the chalice around its brim with red roses, and then place it between the sunlight and the shade. The emanating radiance would be somewhat similar to the beauty of Rabbi Johanan." Another Talmudic story about him relates that Johanan was accustomed to go and sit at the gates of the bathing place. He said: "Let the daughters of Israel look at me when they come up from the [mikvah](#) and their children will be as handsome as I am and they will learn Torah like I do." He then said a special verse so no jealousy or haughtiness would result from this.

[Eleazar ben Pedat](#) succeeded Yohanan as head of the Tiberias school. Another student was [Rabbi Isaac the smith](#).

## Shim'on ben Lakish



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shimon\\_ben\\_Lakish](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shimon_ben_Lakish)

Shim'on ben Lakish ([Hebrew](#): שמעון בן לקיש), better known by his nickname Resh Lakish, was an [amora](#) who lived in the [Roman province](#) of [Syria Palaestina](#) in the third century. He was reputedly born in [Bosra](#), east of the [Jordan River](#), around 200 CE, but lived most of his life in [Sepphoris](#). Nothing is known of his ancestry except his father's name.

He is something of an anomaly among the giants of Torah study as he was supposed to have been in his early youth a [bandit](#) and a [gladiator](#).

Resh Lakish was regarded as one of the most prominent amoraim of the second generation, the other being his brother-in-law and [halakhic](#) opponent, [Johanan bar Nappaha](#).

## The First Encounter Between Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish

(Bava Metzia 84a)

*One day Rabbi Yochanan was swimming in the Jordan. Resh Lakish saw him and leapt into the Jordan after him.*

*He [Rabbi Yochanan] said "Your strength for Torah."*

*He [Resh Lakish] said, "Your beauty for women."*

*He [Rabbi Yochanan] said "If you return also, I will give you my sister who is more beautiful than me."*

*He [Resh Lakish] accepted, He [Resh Lakish] tried to go back and collect his weapons but he was not able to go back. He [Rabbi Yochanan] taught him [Resh Lakish] scripture and he taught him Oral Torah and he made him a great man.*

## Genesis 6:9

*These are the offspring of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, perfect in his generations*

## Foliatum

Rosy scent of Foliatum from ancient Rome was described by Pliny as the "fragrance of rich women", and contains old-World ingredients like balanos oil (mentioned by Theophrastus in his Enquiry into Plants) and omphacium. The use of perfume in ancient Rome was notoriously abundant: from baths to clothes, shoes, wines, dogs and horses, everything was

scented. The lavish use of expensive fragrances was criticized by poets like Martial and Horace, but rich patricians were hardly impressed.



### **The Text: Babylonia Talmud Sanhedrin 108a**

Scripture states (Genesis 6:9): "*These are the offspring of Noah [Noah was a righteous man, perfect in his generations]*".

Rabbi Yochanan said: in his generation he was considered perfectly righteous, but he would NOT have been considered perfectly righteous in other generations.

But Reish Lakish Said: if in his generations he was able to be righteous, he would certainly have been righteous if he had lived in other generations.

Rabbi Chanina said: in terms of a parable illustrating the opinion of Rabbi Yochanan, to what is the matter analogous? To a barrel of wine that was lying in a cellar full of vinegar. While the wine is in its place, among the vinegar, its aroma waft and it is particularly noticeable, in comparison to the odor of vinegar.

However, when the wine is not in its place among the vinegar, its aroma does not waft, i.e. it is not so noticeable. Similarly, Noah's righteousness was noteworthy in his evil generation, but would not have attracted attention in a righteous generation.

Rabbi Oshaya said: in terms of a parable illustrating the opinion of Reish Lakish, to what is the matter analogous? It is analogous to a flask of foliatum (aromatic oil of balsam) that was lying in a place of filth. Even while in its place, among the filth its aroma wafts and is noticeable; and it is certainly even more noticeable in a fragrant place. Similarly, if Noah's conduct was praiseworthy in spite of the fact that he lived in an evil generation, it would certainly have been more praiseworthy if he had lived in a more righteous generation.



## Explaining the Story

What is the sequence of events that take place in the story?

### Comprehension and Analysis Questions

**?** Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish have a different appreciation of Noah's greatness or lack thereof. Do you see both approaches rooted in the Biblical text? Which approach is closest to your heart? Why?

**Bonus Question ?** How does the upbringing of Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish inform their interpretation of the Biblical text?

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

**!** Who you are, where you come from, what you think, and what you believe, are intrinsically tied together.

## EPILOGUE

The more we know about a person and his or her upbringing and personal vicissitudes, the more we can understand his or her thinking, beliefs and actions.

I like to suggest that Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish's interpretation of the Biblical verse in Genesis and the way they judge Noah's character is a direct product of their personal history. Rabbi Yochanan's exposure to great Torah teachers from a young age makes his judgment more absolute and harsher. On the other hand, Resh Lakish's upbringing among bandits and low-class people makes him more sympathetic to Noah. Through his rabbinic assessment of Noah's character and his unfavorable environment, Resh Lakish reflects on his own harsh upbringing and indirectly suggests that had he grown up in a more favorable environment like the one Rabbi Yochanan grew up in, he would have surpassed him in Torah knowledge.