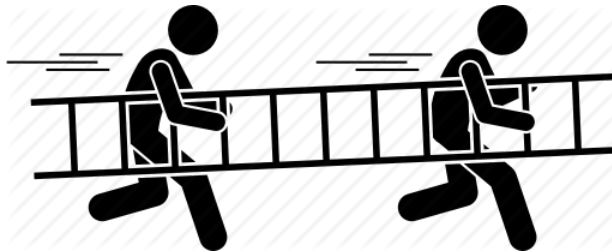


From the Rabbi's Desk
Rabbi Manes Kogan
Hillcrest Jewish Center
183-02 Union Turnpike, Flushing, NY 11366
rabbikogan@hillcrestjc.org

Stories with a Twist [259]

This One is a Nuisance. They went up to the Roof and Took the Ladder Out from Under Them

(Insights into Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 26a)



Background to Our Story

Reish Lakish



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simeon_ben_Lakish

Simeon ben Lakish (in Hebrew, *Shimon ben Lakish*; in Aramaic, *Shimon bar Lakish* or *bar Lakisha*), better known by his nickname Resh Lakish, was an amora who lived in the Roman province of Syria Palaestina in the third century CE. He was reputedly born in Bosra, east of the Jordan River, in around 200 CE, but lived most of his life in Sepphoris (Grätz, "Gesch." v. 240). 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 gladiator. He was regarded as one of the most prominent amoraim of the second generation, the other being his brother-in-law and halakhic opponent Rabbi Yochanan.

Many stories are told of Simeon's gigantic strength and of his corpulence. He was accustomed to lie on the hard ground, saying, "My fat is my cushion" (Gittim 47a). Under the stress of unfavorable circumstances, he gave up the study of the Torah and sought to support himself by a worldly calling. He sold himself to the managers of a circus ("*ludii*," "*ludiarii*"), where he could make use of his great bodily strength. He worked as a gladiator, where he was compelled to risk his life continually in combats with wild beasts (ib.) According to other sources, Resh Lakish lived for a time in the wilderness where he made his livelihood as a bandit. From this low estate he was brought back to his studies by Rabbi Yochanan.

Rabbi Yochanan



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yochanan_bar_Nafcha

Rabbi Yochanan (also known as Rabbi Yochanan bar Nafcha "Rabbi Yochanan son [of the] blacksmith,") (died c. 279) was a rabbi in the early era of the Talmud. He was born in Tzippori in the Land of Israel. His father, a blacksmith, died prior to his birth, and his mother died soon after; he was raised by his grandfather in Tzippori.

Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi took the boy under his wing and taught him Torah. Due to the disparity in ages, though — Yochanan was only fifteen years old when Rabbi Yehuda died — Yochanan was not one of Rabbi Yehuda's prime students; rather, he studied more under Rabbi Yehuda's students. He studied Torah diligently all his life, even selling what 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, Rabbi Yochanan decided to move from Tzippori to Tiberias, so as not to show disrespect to great rabbis in Tzippori 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 Torah Jewry, Babylonia — so much so that after the deaths of Rav and Shmuel in Babylonia, Rabbi Yochanan 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, Simeon ben Lakish, was also his brother-in-law. He was the first person to disagree with some of the Mishnah and want it changed. He was a very independent man and a creative thinker.

He is believed to have never left Palestine in all his life, a rare feat for rabbis in those days, who frequently visited Babylonia. Rabbi Yochanan was known for his beauty and reportedly lived more than one hundred years.

Eleazar ben Pedat succeeded R' Yochanan as head of the Tiberias school.

Intercalation of the year



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Sanhedrin I. Koren Publishers. Jerusalem.

Page 161

The Jewish calendar, which follows a lunar cycle of twelve months of twenty-nine or thirty days, is also related to the solar cycle, because the Festivals must be held in their appropriate seasons. In particular, Passover must be in the spring, at the time of the barley harvest, and *Sukkot* must fall at the time of the autumnal equinox. The solar year is slightly more than eleven days longer than twelve lunar months. To compensate for this difference, the year is periodically intercalated, i.e., a thirteenth lunar month is added after the month of Adar and is referred to as Second Adar.

During the period when the calendar was set every year by the Sanhedrin, the question of whether to add an extra month required a unique decision-making process. First, the matter was considered by three judges selected from the Sanhedrin. If they thought an additional month was necessary, two more judges were asked to join the deliberations. If this body also agreed, two more judges were added, bringing the total to seven. These judges would make the final decision. Among the factors the judges would consider when deciding whether or not to add an extra month, apart from the requirement that the Festivals fall in their appropriate seasons, were the climatic conditions and whether the crops had ripened sufficiently (see 12b).

From the fourth century CE, the Jewish calendar has operated on a fixed calendar using a nineteen-year cycle, correlating the lunar and solar calendars. Second Adar is added in the 3rd, 6th, 8th, 11th, 14th, 17th, and 19th years of each cycle.

Shmita



<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shmita>

The sabbath year (shmita Hebrew: שמיטה, literally "release") also called the sabbatical year or shəvi'it (שביעית, literally "seventh") is the seventh year of the seven-year agricultural cycle mandated by the Torah for the Land of Israel, and still observed in contemporary Judaism.

During shmita, the land is left to lie fallow and all agricultural activity, including plowing, planting, pruning and harvesting, is forbidden by halakha (Jewish law). Other cultivation techniques (such as watering, fertilizing, weeding, spraying, trimming and mowing) may be performed as a preventive measure only, not to improve the growth of trees or other plants. Additionally, any fruits or herbs which grow of their own accord and where no watch is kept over them are deemed hefker (ownerless) and may be picked by anyone. A variety of laws also apply to the sale, consumption and disposal of shmita produce. All debts, except those of foreigners, were to be remitted.

Chapter 25 of the Book of Leviticus promises bountiful harvests to those who observe the shmita, and describes its observance as a test of religious faith. There is little notice of the observance of this year in Biblical history and it appears to have been much neglected.

Bale for Olive Press

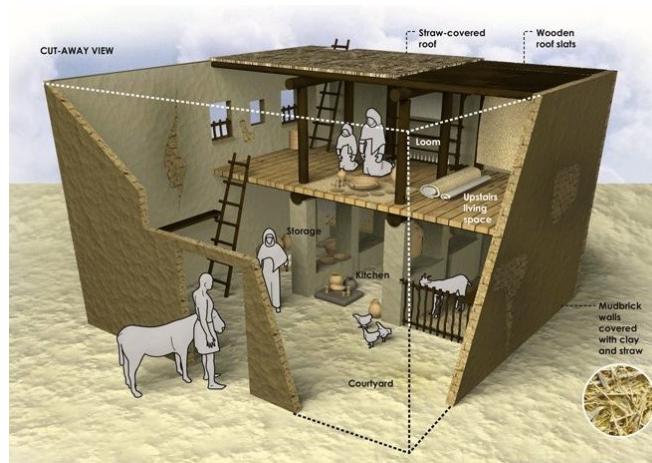


Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Sanhedrin I. Koren Publishers. Jerusalem.

Page 161

Olives were placed in the bale to be pressed by the beam of the olive press, whereupon the oil would flow through the holes in the bale. The function of the bale was to keep the olives in.

Ladder Leading to the Upper Rooms



The Text: Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 26a

Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Zarnokei and Rabbi Shimon ben Yehotzadak were going to intercalate the year in Asya, as circumstances did not enable them to perform the intercalation of the year in Eretz Yisrael.

Reish Lakish met them and joined with them. He said: I will go see how they do the deed, i.e., how the intercalation is performed practically.

Reish Lakish saw a certain man plowing a field. He said to the other Sages: Look at this priest who is plowing during the Sabbatical Year.

They said to him that he could say in his own defense: I am a hired worker [*agiston*] in the field, which belongs to a gentile. Therefore, it is permitted.

Reish Lakish further saw a certain man pruning vines in the vineyards. He said to the other Sages: Look at this priest who is pruning vines during the Sabbatical Year. They said to him that he could say: I need the branches to make a bale [*ekel*] for my olive press, i.e., a basket to hold olives for pressing. Since he is not pruning the vines for agricultural purposes but to use the branches, it is permitted for him to do so in the Sabbatical Year.

Reish Lakish said to them, in a play on words: The heart knows whether he is doing so for a bale [*ekel*], or whether he is saying this as deceit [*la'akalkalot*].

...

Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Zarnokei and Rabbi Shimon ben Yehotzadak said: This one is a nuisance. When they reached the location where they intended to intercalate the year, they went up to the roof and took the ladder out from under them so that he [Shimon ben Lakish] would stay below and would not be able to join them.

Sometime later, Reish Lakish came before Rabbi Yoḥanan. Reish Lakish said to him: Are people who are suspected of desecrating the Sabbatical Year fit to intercalate the year? Reish Lakish then said in response to his own question: This is not difficult for me; just as the Sages once intercalated the year in accordance with

the assessment of three cattle herders, which was permitted, as the Sages depended not on the assessment of the cattle herders but on their own calculation, perhaps here too the Sages depended on their own calculations and not on the decision of Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Zarnokei and Rabbi Shimon ben Yehotzadak.

Reish Lakish changed his mind and then said: It is not similar. There, in the case of the cattle herders, afterward the Sages were counted, i.e., they made a decision, and intercalated that year themselves. Here, by contrast, it is a conspiracy of wicked people, as the Sages who intercalated the year are disqualified from doing so; and a conspiracy of wicked people is not counted.

Rabbi Yoḥanan said: This problem you raise is troublesome.

When Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Zarnokei and Rabbi Shimon ben Yehotzadak subsequently came before Rabbi Yoḥanan, after hearing about his discussion with Reish Lakish, they said to him bitterly: Reish Lakish referred to us as cattle herders, and the Master said nothing to him in response?

Rabbi Yoḥanan said to them dismissively: And even if he had referred to you as shepherds, who are disqualified from bearing witness in addition to being disqualified from serving as judges, what should I have said to him? He is correct.



Explaining the Story - What's going on in our story? (The sequence of events)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Why did Reish Lakish join Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Zarnokei and Rabbi Shimon ben Yehotzadak?

? What was Reish Lakish pointing at while addressing Rabbi H̄iyya bar Zarnokei and Rabbi Shimon ben Yehotzadak? How does Reish Lakish expect Rabbi H̄iyya bar Zarnokei and Rabbi Shimon ben Yehotzadak to react? How do Rabbi H̄iyya bar Zarnokei and Rabbi Shimon ben Yehotzadak react?

Bonus ? Why did Rabbi H̄iyya bar Zarnokei and Rabbi Shimon ben Yehotzadak react the way they did?

? “Reish Lakish said to them [to Rabbi H̄iyya bar Zarnokei and Rabbi Shimon ben Yehotzadak]: The heart knows whether he is doing so for a bale [ekel], or whether he is saying this as deceit [la’akalkalot].” What did Reish Lakish mean by his comment?

? Why did Rabbi H̄iyya bar Zarnokei and Rabbi Shimon ben Yehotzadak remove the ladder from under them when they started deliberating concerning the intercalation of the year?

Extra Bonus Question ? The story doesn’t tell us what Reish Lakish did immediately after Rabbi H̄iyya bar Zarnokei and Rabbi Shimon ben Yehotzadak removed the ladder and prevented him from listening to the deliberation concerning the intercalation of the year? What do you think Reish Lakish did? How do you think he felt?

Bonus ? Reish Lakish went and denounced Rabbi H̄iyya bar Zarnokei and Rabbi Shimon ben Yehotzadak to Rabbi Yoachanan (the most prominent Sage of the 3rd century in the Land of Israel). What was the accusation? On what did Reish Lakish base his accusation?

? What does Reish Lakish omit in his report to Rabbi Yoachanan?

? Why were Rabbi H̄iyya bar Zarnokei and Rabbi Shimon offended? How did Rabbi Yochanan react to their claim?

Extra Bonus Question **?** Why did Reish Lakish denounce Rabbi H̄iyya bar Zarnokei and Rabbi Shimon ben Yehotzadak to Rabbi Yoachanan?

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

! Rejection generates hatred and resentment and the affronted party will, more often than not, make the offender pay the price of the offense.

EPILOGUE