

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [330]

Come Away from Him, So That He Does Not Do to You as He Did to Your Father

Insights into Babylonian Talmud, Ta'anit 9a



Background to Our Story (What you need to know to better understand the 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 Yoḥanan 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 Ḥiyya bar Abba, Rabbi Abbahu, Rabbi Yosei bar Ḥanina, Rabbi Ami, and Rabbi Asi.

Reish Lakish



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Bava Metzia. Volume 2. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 134.

Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish, often referred to as Reish Lakish, was among the greatest *amora'im* in Eretz Yisrael. He was the friend and brother in-law of Rabbi Yoḥanan. Reish Lakish led an extraordinary life. He studied Torah at a young age, but subsequently sold himself to a Roman circus as a gladiator, perhaps due to dire financial straits. Many stories in the Talmud attest to his great strength. Sometime later, in the wake of an encounter with Rabbi Yoḥanan, as described here, he resumed his Torah study, first as a student of Rabbi Yoḥanan, then as a colleague. He married Rabbi Yoḥanan's sister. Many halakhic disputes are recorded between Reish Lakish and Rabbi Yoḥanan concerning central issues in the Talmud. His objective was not to disagree with Rabbi Yoḥanan but rather to help him sharpen his opinion through debate. Rabbi Yoḥanan referred to Reish Lakish with great respect, often saying: My peer disagrees with me. Reish Lakish was well known for his strict piety, to the extent that anyone with whom he was seen conversing in public was said to be able to borrow money without guarantors, as Reish Lakish associated only with people beyond reproach. When he died he was survived by his wife and son, who was a child prodigy (see *Ta'anit* 9a).

Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 84a (Stories with a Twist # 63)

One day the Sages of the study hall were engaging in a dispute concerning the following *baraita*: With regard to the sword, the knife, the dagger, the spear, a hand sickle, and a harvest sickle, from when are they susceptible to ritual impurity? The *baraita* answers: It is from the time of the completion of their manufacture, which is the *halakha* with regard to metal vessels in general.

These Sages inquired: And when is the completion of their manufacture? Rabbi Yoḥanan says: It is from when one fires these items in the furnace. Reish Lakish said: It is from when one scours them in water, after they have been fired in the furnace.

Rabbi Yoḥanan said to Reish Lakish: A bandit knows about his banditry.

Reish Lakish said to Rabbi Yoḥanan: What benefit did you provide me by bringing me close to Torah? There, among the bandits, they called me: Leader, and here, too, they call me: Leader.

Rabbi Yoḥanan said to him: I provided benefit to you, as I brought you close to God, under the wings of the Divine Presence.

Rabbi Yoḥanan was offended, Reish Lakish, fell ill.

Rabbi Yoḥanan's sister, who was Reish Lakish's wife, came crying to Rabbi Yoḥanan. She said to him: Do this for the sake of my children. Rabbi Yoḥanan said to her the verse: "Leave your fatherless children, I will rear them" (Jeremiah 49:11). She said to him: Do so for the sake of my widowhood. He said to her the rest of the verse: "And let your widows trust in Me."

Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish died.

Deuteronomy 14:22

עֲשֹׂר תַעֲשֹׂר אֶת כָּל־תְּבוּאת זְרַעְךָ הַיֵּצֵא הַשָּׂדֶה שָׁנָה שָׁנָה:

You shall truly tithe all the increase of your grain that the field produces year by year.

Deuteronomy 14:22

לֹא תִנְסֹוּ אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם כַּאֲשֶׁר נִסִּיתֶם בַּמָּסָה:

You shall not test the Lord your God as you did at Massah.

Malachi 3:10

הֲבִיאוּ אֶת־כָּל־הַמַּעֲשֵׂר אֶל־בֵּית הָאוֹצָר וַיְהִי טָרֶף בְּבֵיתִי וּבְחֲנוּנַי נָא בְּזֹאת אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת אֱמִי לֹא אֶפְתַּח לָכֶם אֶת אַרְבּוֹת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהִרִיקֹתִי לָכֶם בְּרָכָה עַד־בְּלִי־דִי:

“Bring the whole tithe into the storeroom, that there may be food in My house, and test Me now by this, said the Lord of hosts, if I will not open for you the windows of heaven, and pour out for you a blessing that there shall be more than sufficiency.”

Proverbs 19:3

אוֹלַת אָדָם תַּסְלֶף דַּרְכּוֹ וְעַל־יְהוָה יִזְעַף לְבוֹ:

The foolishness of man perverts his way, and his heart frets against the Lord

Genesis 42:28

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־אֶחָיו הַיּוֹשֵׁב כִּסְפִי וְגַם הַנֶּה בְּאִמְתַּחְתִּי וַיֵּצֵא לָבָם וַיַּחְרְדּוּ אִישׁ אֶל־אֶחָיו לֵאמֹר מַה־נָּתַת עֲשָׂה אֱלֹהִים לָנוּ:

And he said to his brothers, “My money has been returned! It is here in my bag!” “And their heart failed them, and they turned trembling to one to another, saying: What is this that God has done to us?”.

The Text: Babylonian Talmud, Ta’anit 9a

אֲשַׁכְּחִיהָ רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן לִיְנוּקָא דְרִישׁ לְקִישׁ, אָמַר לִיה: אֵימָא לִי פְסוּקִידָא! אָמַר לִיה: “עֲשֹׂר תַעֲשֹׂר”. אָמַר לִיה: וּמַאי “עֲשֹׂר תַעֲשֹׂר”? אָמַר לִיה: עֲשֹׂר בְּשִׁבִיל שְׂתַתַּעֲשֹׂר, אָמַר לִיה: מִנָּא לָךְ? אָמַר לִיה: זִיל נְסִי.

אָמַר לִיה: וּמִי שָׁרִי לְנִסּוּיִיהָ לְהַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא? וְהִקְתִּיב: “לֹא תִנְסֹוּ אֶת ה'!” אָמַר לִיה, הֲכִי אָמַר רַבִּי הוֹשַׁעֲיָא: חוּץ מְזוּ, שְׁנֹאֲמַר: “הֲבִיאוּ אֶת כָּל הַמַּעֲשֵׂר אֶל בֵּית הָאוֹצָר וַיְהִי טָרֶף בְּבֵיתִי וּבְחֲנוּנַי נָא בְּזֹאת אָמַר ה' צְבָאוֹת אֱמִי לֹא אֶפְתַּח לָכֶם אֶת אַרְבּוֹת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהִרִיקֹתִי לָכֶם בְּרָכָה עַד בְּלִי דִי”. מַאי “עַד בְּלִי דִי”? אָמַר רַמִּי בַר חֲמָא אָמַר רַב: עַד שִׁיבְלוּ שְׂפֹתוֹתֵיכֶם מִלּוֹמַר “דִּי”. אָמַר לִיה: אֵי הָוֹת מְטִי הָתָם לְהֵאִי פְסוּקָא, לֹא הָוִית צְרִיכָנָא לָךְ וְלְהוֹשַׁעֲיָא רַבָּךְ.

וְתוֹ אֲשַׁכְּחִיהָ רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן לִיְנוּקִיהָ דְרִישׁ לְקִישׁ דִּיתִיב וְאָמַר: “אוֹלַת אָדָם תַּסְלֶף דַּרְכּוֹ וְעַל ה' יִזְעַף לְבוֹ”.

יְתִיב רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן וְקָא מִתְמַה. אָמַר: מִי אֵיכָא מִיַּדִּי דְכְתִיבִי בְּכַתוּבֵי דְלֹא רַמִּיזִי בְּאוּרִייתָא? אָמַר לִיה: אַטּוּ הָא מִי לֹא רַמִּיזִי, וְהִקְתִּיב: “וַיֵּצֵא לָבָם וַיַּחְרְדּוּ אִישׁ אֶל אֶחָיו לֵאמֹר מַה זֹאת עֲשָׂה אֱלֹהִים לָנוּ”.

דַּל עֵינֵיהָ וְחִזָּא בֵּיה, אֲתִינָא אֵימִיהָ אֶפִיקַתִּיהָ, אָמְרָה לִיה: תָּא מִקְמִיהָ, דְלֹא לִיעֲבַד לָךְ כְּדַעְבַּד לְאַבוּךָ.

First Episode

Rabbi Yoḥanan found the young son of Reish Lakish. He said to the boy: Recite to me your verse, i.e., the verse you studied today in school.

The boy said to him: "A tithe shall you tithe." (Deuteronomy 14:22) The boy further said to Rabbi Yoḥanan: But what is the meaning of this phrase: "A tithe shall you tithe"?

Rabbi Yoḥanan said to him: The verse means: Take a tithe so that you will become wealthy.

The boy said to Rabbi Yoḥanan:

From where do you derive that this is so?

Rabbi Yoḥanan said to him: Go and test it.

The boy said to him: And is it permitted to test the Holy One, Blessed be He? But isn't it written: "You shall not test the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 6:16)?

Rabbi Yoḥanan said to the boy that Rabbi Hoshaya said as follows: It is prohibited to test God in any way, except in this case of tithes, as it is stated (Malachi 3:10): "Bring the whole tithe into the storeroom, that there may be food in My house, and test Me now by this, said the Lord of hosts, if I will not open for you the windows of heaven, and pour out for you a blessing that there shall be more than sufficiency."

In relation to the above verse, the Gemara asks: What is the meaning of the phrase: "That there shall be more than sufficiency [ad beli dai]"? Rami bar Ḥama said that Rav said: It means that the abundance will be so great that your lips will be worn out [yivlu], similar to the word beli, from saying enough [dai].

Returning to the above incident, the Gemara adds that the boy said to Rabbi Yoḥanan: Your claim appears explicitly in a verse. If I had arrived there, at this verse, I would not have needed you or Hoshaya your teacher, as I could have understood it on my own.

Second Episode

And furthermore, on a different occasion Rabbi Yoḥanan found the young son of Reish Lakish, when he was sitting and reciting the verse (Proverbs 19:3): “The foolishness of man perverts his way, and his heart frets against the Lord”. This verse means that when someone sins and every manner of mishap befalls him, he complains and wonders why these things are happening to him.

Rabbi Yoḥanan sat down and wondered aloud about this verse, saying: Is there anything that is written in the Writings that is not alluded to in the Torah at all? I cannot think of any hint of this idea in the Torah itself.

The child said to him: Is that to say that this idea is really not alluded to in the Torah? But isn't it written, with regard to Joseph's brothers (Genesis 42:48): “And their heart failed them and they turned trembling to one to another, saying: What is this that God has done to us?”. This verse exemplifies the notion that when one sins and encounters troubles, he wonders why it is happening to him.

Rabbi Yoḥanan raised his eyes and stared at the boy.

At this point, the boy's mother came and took him away, saying to him: Come away from Rabbi Yoḥanan, so that he does not do to you as he did to your father.



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

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

First Episode

? Why did Rabbi Yoḥanan ask the son of Reish Lakish to recite for him the verse he studied in school?

Bonus ? Why did the boy ask Rabbi Yoḥanan for the meaning of the verse?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? “If I had arrived there, at this verse, I would not have needed you or Hoshaya your teacher, as I could have understood it on my own.” Why didn’t the boy arrive at the verse in question?

Extra Bonus ? “If I had arrived there, at this verse, I would not have needed you or Hoshaya your teacher, as I could have understood it on my own.” The boy’s answer seems daring, in the best of scenarios, and even disrespectful, given whom he was talking to? Why do you think the boy retorted to Rabbi Yoḥanan the way he did?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Second Episode

Extra Bonus ? Why is the boy (the son of Reish Lakish) able to find a connection between the verse in Proverbs and the one in the Torah, something that Rabbi Yoḥanan couldn’t do?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Extra ? Why did Rabbi Yoḥanan raise his eyes and look at the boy?

Extra ? Why did the boy’s mother take him away from Rabbi Yoḥanan? What is she afraid of? Why?

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

! The long and lasting effect of trauma, or: Once bitten, twice shy! – the idiom Reish Lakish’s wife learned, and her son has yet to learn.



Our two-episodes story confronts the sharp, and yet unpolished, son of Reish Lakish, with the leader of the generation, the colossal Rabbi Yoḥanan. The bright

boy bests Rabbi Yoḥanan in Torah arguments, not unlike the way his father used to do when he was alive.

The reader is left to wonder if the smart boy's sharp retorts are a consequence of his awareness that Rabbi Yoḥanan was responsible, albeit indirectly, for his father's death, or if he is just an irreverent boy, again, not unlike his father (see Bava Metzia 84a).

In any event, the boy's mother doesn't want to take any chance. She knows of the personality and weight of Rabbi Yoḥanan. Not wishing her son to suffer the same fate as her late husband, she tells him: "Come away, so that he does not do to you as he did to your father."