

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist

[63]

**Where Are You, Son of Lakish? Where Are You, Son of
Lakish?**

Insights into Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 84a



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 Hiyya bar Abba, Rabbi Abbahu, Rabbi Yosei bar Hanina, 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 Yoĥanan. 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 Yoĥanan, as described here, he resumed his Torah study, first as a student of Rabbi Yoĥanan, then as a colleague. He married Rabbi Yoĥanan's sister. Many halakhic disputes are recorded between Reish Lakish and Rabbi Yoĥanan concerning central issues in the Talmud. His objective was not to disagree with Rabbi Yoĥanan but rather to help him sharpen his opinion through debate. Rabbi Yoĥanan 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).

Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat



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

In the Gemara, citations of Rabbi Elazar without a patronymic refer to Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat, a second-generation *amora* from Eretz Yisrael. He was born in Babylonia, where he was a student of both Rav and Shmuel. In his youth he immigrated to Eretz Yisrael, where he married and became the primary student of Rabbi Yoĥanan. The connection between Rabbi Elazar and Rabbi Yoĥanan was so close that at times the Gemara raises a contradiction between the statement of one and the statement of the other, under the assumption that it was unlikely that they would hold different opinions in matters of *halakha*.

Chavruta



<http://www.thejc.com/>

Study with a chavruta, or partner, is a hallmark of traditional Jewish learning. Together you break your heads on the texts. Two minds applied to a problem are almost always better than one.

Each checks and corrects the misconceptions of the other, questioning and sharpening the other's ideas, while the necessity of articulating one's thoughts to another person brings greater clarity than learning alone. Indeed, the Talmud goes so far as to say that one who learns Torah alone becomes stupid! (Berachot 63a)

Chavruta comes from the Hebrew word meaning, simply, "friend." Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) states the fundamental importance of companionship in Jewish learning (and in general): "Make for yourself a teacher, find yourself a friend, and judge every person favorably."

Commentators explain the final, apparently unrelated, clause as being an essential requirement for achieving the first two. Being endlessly judgmental and critical makes it very hard to commit to, and keep, either friends or teachers.

There are numerous statements in the sources that stress the essential sociability of study. The unbearability of life without scholarly companionship is poignantly expressed about Honi the Circle-maker, "Either chavruta or mituta," "either friendship or death" (Taanit 23a).

Some suggest that the quality of relationship between the chavrutas is as important religiously as the content of what is studied. "When two scholars of Torah listen to one another, God hears their voices," says the Talmud (Shabbat 63a).

By Rabbi Julian Sinclair, November 5, 2008



<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chavruta>

Chavruta, from Aramaic for *friend*, is a traditional Rabbinic approach to learning in which pairs study a shared text in discussion and debate. It is a primary learning method used in yeshivot, where participants will often acquire regular study partners of similar ability.

This tradition may originate in the fact that many Tannaim and Amoraim regularly dispute with a particular other Rabbi in the Talmud in matters of Jewish law. A simple explanation would be that the two were regular study partners.

Written Torah



<http://www.jewfaq.org/torah.htm>

To Jews, there is no "Old Testament." The books that Christians call the New Testament are not part of Jewish scripture. The so-called Old Testament is known to us as Written Torah or the Tanakh.

This is a list of the books of Written Torah, in the order in which they appear in Jewish translations, with the Hebrew name of the book, a translation of the Hebrew name (where it is not the same as the English name), and English names of the books (where it is not the same as the Hebrew name). The Hebrew names of the first five books are derived from the first few words of the book. The text of each book is more or less the same in Jewish translations as what you see in Christian bibles, although there are some occasional, slight differences in the numbering of verses and there are some significant differences in the translations.

TORAH (The Law):

- Bereishith (In the beginning...) (Genesis)
- Shemoth (The names...) (Exodus)
- Vayiqra (And He called...) (Leviticus)
- Bamidbar (In the wilderness...) (Numbers)
- Devarim (The words...) (Deuteronomy)

NEVI'IM (The Prophets):

- Yehoshua (Joshua)
- Shoftim (Judges)
- Shmuel (I & II Samuel)
- Melakhim (I & II Kings)
- Yeshayah (Isaiah)
- Yirmyah (Jeremiah)
- Yechezqel (Ezekiel)
- The Twelve (treated as one book)
 - Hoshea (Hosea)
 - Yoel (Joel)
 - Amos
 - Ovadyah (Obadiah)
 - Yonah (Jonah)
 - Mikhah (Micah)
 - Nachum
 - Chavaqquq (Habbakkuk)
 - Tzefanyah (Zephaniah)
 - Chaggai
 - Zekharyah (Zechariah)
 - Malakhi

KETHUVIM (The Writings):

- Tehillim (Psalms)
- Mishlei (Proverbs)
- Iyov (Job)
- Shir Ha-Shirim (Song of Songs)
- Ruth
- Eikhah (Lamentations)
- Qoheleth (the author's name) (Ecclesiastes)
- Esther
- Daniel
- Ezra & Nechemyah (Nehemiah) (treated as one book)
- Divrei Ha-Yamim (The words of the days) (Chronicles)

Written Torah is often referred to as the Tanakh, which is an acronym of Torah, Nevi'im and Ketuvim.

Oral Torah

In addition to the written scriptures, we have an "Oral Torah," a tradition explaining what the above scriptures mean and how to interpret them and apply the Laws. Orthodox Jews believe God taught the Oral Torah to Moses, and he taught it to others, down to the present day. This tradition was maintained only in oral form until about the 2d century C.E., when the oral law was compiled and written down in a document called the Mishnah.

Tohorot



Tohorot (Hebrew: literally "Purities") is the sixth order of the Mishnah (also the Tosefta and Talmud). This order deals with the clean/unclean distinction and family purity. This is the longest of the orders in the Mishnah. There are 12 tractates:

1. *Tractate Keilim*: ("Vessels"); deals with a large array of various utensils and how they fare in terms of purity. 30 chapters, the longest in the Mishnah.

Sword, Knife, Dagger, Spear, Hand Sickle and Harvest Sickle



2.



3.



Orphans and Widows in Ancient Times



The Torah says (Exodus 22:21) "*Do not mistreat widows and orphans.*" This is Negative Mitzvah #256. Treating widows and orphans properly is a form of Tzedakah, which, as explained, is the right response for the situation. Widows and orphans face the daily pain of a lost husband or father, so this Mitzvah installs a societal safeguard around their aching hearts, making it mandatory to go easy on them. Not only that, but widows and orphans are more susceptible to mistreatment and financial struggles, and therefore in need of special consideration and support.

The Text: Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 84a

יֹמָא חַד הָוָה קָא סְחֵי רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן בְּנֵי רִדְנָא. תַּזְנִייה רִישׁ לְקִישׁ וּשְׁוֹר לִירְדְנָא אַבְתְּרִיהּ. אָמַר לִיה חִילָּךְ לְאוֹרִייתָא. אָמַר לִיה שׁוֹפְרָךְ לְנָשִׁי. אָמַר לִיה אִי הָדַרְתָּ בָּךְ יְהִיבָנָא לָךְ אַחוּתִי, דְּשִׁפְרָא מִינְאִי. קָבִיל עֲלִיהּ. בְּעֵי לְמִיְהָדַר לְאַתּוּנִי מְאִנְיָה וְלֹא מְצִי הָדַר.

אַקְרִינִיה וְאַתְנִייה וְשׁוֹנִייה גְבָרָא רַבָּא. יֹמָא חַד הָוּוּ מְפַלְגֵי בֵּי מְדַרְשָׁא: הַסִּיף וְהַסִּפִּין וְהַפְּגִיּוֹן וְהַרֹמַח וְהַמַּגֵּל יָד וְהַמַּגֵּל קָצִיר מְאִימְתִי מְקַבְּלִין טוּמְאַה – מְשַׁעֵת גָּמַר מְלֹאכְתָּן.

וּמְאִימְתִי גָמַר מְלֹאכְתָּן? רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן אָוּמַר: מְשִׁיבְרַפִּם בְּפִשְׁוֹן. רִישׁ לְקִישׁ אָמַר: מְשִׁיבְרַפִּין בְּמִימֵם. אָמַר לִיה לְסַטְאַה בְּלִסְטִיּוּתִיהּ יָדַע. אָמַר לִיה: וּמְאִי אַהֲבִית לִי? הָתֵם ״רַבִּי״ קָרוּ לִי, הָקָא ״רַבִּי״ קָרוּ לִי! אָמַר לִיה: אַהֲבִי לָךְ דְּאַקְרִיבִיךָ תַּחַת פְּנֵי הַשְּׂכִינָה.

חֲלַשׁ דְּעַתִּיהּ דְּרַבִּי יוֹחָנָן, חֲלַשׁ רִישׁ לְקִישׁ. אַתְאִי אַחְתִּיהּ קָא בְּכִיָּא. אָמַרָה לִיה: עֲשֵׂה בְּשִׁבִיל בְּנִי! אָמַר לִיה: ״עֲזָבָה יְתַמִּיךָ אֲנִי אַחְתִּיהּ״. עֲשֵׂה בְּשִׁבִיל אֲלִמְנוּתִי! אָמַר לִיה: ״וְאַלְמְנוּתִיךָ עָלִי תִבְטְחוּ״.

נח נפשיה דרבי שמעון בן לקיש, והיה קא מצטער רבי יוחנן בתריה טובא. אמרו רבנן: מאן ליזיל ליתביה לדעתיה? ניזיל רבי אלעזר בן פדת, דמתדיין שמעתיה.

אזל יתיב קמיה. כל מילתא דהוה אמר רבי יוחנן אמר ליה: תנא דמסייעא לך. אמר: את כבר לקישא?! בר לקישא, כי הוה אמינא מילתא, הוה מקשי לי עשרין וארבע קושיותא, ומפרקינא ליה עשרין וארבעה פרוקי, וממילא רווחא שמעתא. ואת אמרת: "תנא דמסייע לך", אטו לא ידענא דשפיר קאמינא?

הוה קא אזיל וקרע מאניה וקא בכי ואמר: "היכא את בר לקישא, היכא את בר לקישא!" והוה קא צוח עד דשף דעתיה מיניה. בעו רבנן רחמי עליה ונח נפשיה.

One day, Rabbi Yoḥanan was bathing in the Jordan River. Reish Lakish saw him and jumped into the Jordan, pursuing him. At that time, Reish Lakish was the leader of a band of marauders. Rabbi Yoḥanan said to Reish Lakish: Your strength is fit for Torah study. Reish Lakish said to him: Your beauty is fit for women. Rabbi Yoḥanan said to him: If you return to the pursuit of Torah, I will give you my sister in marriage, who is more beautiful than I am. Reish Lakish accepted upon himself to study Torah. Subsequently, Reish Lakish wanted to jump back out of the river to bring back his clothes, but he was unable to return, as he had lost his physical strength.

Rabbi Yoḥanan taught Reish Lakish Bible, and taught him Mishna, and turned him into a great man. Eventually, Reish Lakish became one of the outstanding Torah scholars of his generation.

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.

Rabbi Yoḥanan was sorely pained over losing him.

The Rabbis said: Who will go to calm Rabbi Yoḥanan's mind and comfort him over his loss? They said: Let Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat go, as his statements are sharp, i.e., he is clever and will be able to serve as a substitute for Reish Lakish.

Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat went and sat before Rabbi Yoḥanan. With regard to every matter that Rabbi Yoḥanan would say, Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat would say to him: There is a ruling which is taught in a *baraita* that supports your opinion. Rabbi Yoḥanan said to him: Are you comparable to the son of Lakish? In my discussions with the son of Lakish, when I would state a matter, he would raise twenty-four difficulties against me in an attempt to disprove my claim, and I would answer him with twenty-four answers, and the *halakha* by itself would become broadened and clarified. And yet you say to me: There is a ruling which is taught in a *baraita* that supports your opinion. Do I not know that what I say is good?

Rabbi Yoḥanan went around, rending his clothing, weeping and saying: Where are you, son of Lakish? Where are you, son of Lakish? Rabbi Yoḥanan screamed until his mind was taken from him, i.e., he went insane.

The Rabbis requested for God to have mercy on him, and Rabbi Yoḥanan died.



Explaining the Story

What's going on in our story? (The sequence of events)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

Bonus ? Why do you think Reish Lakish jumped into the Jordan pursuing Rabbi Yoḥanan?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? Why did Rabbi Yoḥanan say to Reish Lakish: "Your strength is fit for Torah"?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Why did Reish Lakish reply to Rabbi Yoḥanan: "Your beauty is fit for women"?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Bonus ? Why was Rabbi Yoḥanan in a position to say to Reish Lakish: "If you return to the pursuit of Torah, I will give you my sister in marriage, who is more beautiful than I am"? What did Rabbi Yoḥanan intend to achieve through his offer?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Bonus ? What insinuation do we have in the text that Rabbi Yoḥanan knew about Reish Lakish from before their encounter in the Jordan River?

Bonus ? Why couldn't Reish Lakish jump back to retrieve his clothes, after accepting Rabbi Yoḥanan 's offer?

? Why did Rabbi Yoḥanan start his lessons with Bible and Mishna? Why did Reish Lakish become a great man only then?

Bonus ? How do we know that our story took place quite a long time after Rabbi Yoḥanan and Reish Lakish’s first encounter?

? What was the legal discussion between Rabbi Yoḥanan and Reish Lakish about?

Extra Bonus ? What do you think prompted Rabbi Yoḥanan to say to Reish Lakish “A bandit knows about his banditry”?

Extra Bonus ? How is Rabbi Yoḥanan’s remark about Reish Lakish’ past, radically different from his previous opinion on the subject of discussion (the point of completion of different tools)?

? Why did Reish Lakish retort 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”?

? Why did Rabbi Yoḥanan become offended after hearing Reish Lakish’s remarks?

Bonus ? Why did Reish Lakish’s wife come crying to Rabbi Yoḥanan after her husband became ill?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

Answer 5 _____

Answer 6 _____

Answer 7 _____

Answer 8 _____

? Why did Reish Lakish’s wife argue on her behalf and on behalf of her children as opposed to on behalf of her husband?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? Why do you think Rabbi Yoḥanan didn’t acquiesce to his sister’s request?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Bonus ? Why was Rabbi Yoḥanan pained by Reish Lakish's passing?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? How did Rabbi Yoḥanan's students try to comfort their Master after Reish Lakish's passing? Why didn't it work?

Bonus ? Why did Rabbi Yoḥanan rend his garment after Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat failed to provide a suitable substitute for Reish Lakish as opposed to after Reish Lakish's passing (even though he was pained)?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Why did the Rabbis ask for mercy on behalf of Rabbi Yoḥanan?

Bonus ? Rabbi Yoḥanan passed away after the Rabbis asked for mercy on his behalf. Why do you think death was the only solution to end Rabbi Yoḥanan's agony?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

More Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? What do you think was Rabbi Yoḥanan's sin in our story? What do you think prompted it?

? What do you think was Reish Lakish's sin in our story? What do you think prompted it?

? What was Reish Lakish's punishment?

? What was Rabbi Yoḥanan's punishment?

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

! How to make friends...and keep them: Lessons we can all learn from this tragic story.

The Ideal *Chavruta* (Study Partner) By Rav Yitzchak Blau

An Analysis of Our Story
The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash
<http://vbm-torah.org/>

Understanding Aggada
Yeshivat Har Etzion



This tragic story includes many aspects that require analysis. First, let us assume that, prior to their meeting in the Jordan, Rabbi Yoḥanan already knew something about Reish Lakish's character and potential. After all, Rabbi Yoḥanan presumably did not offer his sister to every straying Jew as his standard method of *kiruv* (bringing unaffiliated Jews closer to Torah). Rather, he foresaw the greatness that Reish Lakish would achieve. This idea finds support in Tosafot's contention that Reish Lakish was already knowledgeable before he abandoned *miztvot*. (They infer this from the language of "if you return.") Rabbi Yoḥanan may have known Reish Lakish from his earlier history.

As the story jumps from their early meeting to their sad final conversation, the reader may get the mistaken impression that the two of them never shared a fruitful relationship. Missing from this story are all the intervening years in which these brothers-in-law learned together and debated the fine points of Talmudic law. Record of such years is found in the many halakhic debates between Rabbi Yoḥanan and Reish Lakish throughout the Talmud.

The most difficult part of the story is the harsh exchange between these two study partners. Did Rabbi Yoḥanan truly insult Reish Lakish by referring to the sordid aspects of Reish Lakish's past? Did Reish Lakish really question whether or not his decision to return to Torah was worthwhile?

Some commentators refuse to take these lines at face value. The Maharsha states that Rabbi Yoḥanan was not trying to insult his *chavruta*. He rather was admitting that Reish Lakish knew more about knives and was therefore correct in this debate. Tosafot argue that when Reish Lakish spoke about being called a master there, he was not referring to his time as head of the thieves, but to his earlier time as a Talmudic scholar. As he was given an honorific title both before he left the *beit medrash* and after he returned, Reish Lakish wondered how he had grown from the twisted path of his career. While we can appreciate what motivated these commentators, it must be conceded that the simplest reading of this story indicates that a harsh exchange indeed took place.

Rabbi Yoḥanan 's displeasure at what Reish Lakish said may have caused the latter's illness. Therefore, his sister pleads with Rabbi Yoḥanan to intercede on her husband's behalf. Why does he refuse her request? One potential answer is that he was still angry with Reish Lakish for questioning the choice to rejoin the world of Torah. Alternatively, Rabbi Yoḥanan may have thought that he had no special power to bring about his brother-in-law's recovery. He cites verses from *Yirmiyahu* that indicate that only God can help the destitute.

I believe that the key to the story lies in the exchange between Rabbi Yoḥanan and Rabbi Elazar. The latter tries to console Rabbi Yoḥanan by citing proofs for everything Rabbi Yoḥanan says. Rabbi Yoḥanan is incredulous that Rabbi Elazar thinks this will replace Reish Lakish. It was precisely the repeated argumentation between Rabbi Yoḥanan and Reish Lakish that caused a flowering of Torah. This is what Rabbi Yoḥanan feels cannot be replaced.

Rabbi Yoḥanan instructs us that the ideal *chavruta* is not the person who quickly endorses everything his study partner says. On the contrary! The ideal *chavruta* challenges one's ideas. This process generates growth in learning. We should add that the same principle applies to other forms of friendship as well. Instead of looking for friends who will always agree with us, we should seek out those willing to tell us when they think we err on intellectual, ethical or religious grounds.

Assuming that the preceding idea reflects the essential theme of the story, we can now understand the harsh exchange. If the ideal study partnership involves argument, then the constant danger lurks that such argument will get out of hand. In the heat of verbal battle, people will say things that they will later regret but can no longer take back. Thus, the very strength of the Rabbi Yohanan - Reish Lakish partnership was the source of its downfall, as they temporarily lost themselves in the passion of Talmudic debate.

My student Daniel Vinick added an insightful postscript to my reading of this story. Even after the tragedy of Reish Lakish, Rabbi Yoḥanan still rejects the attempt of Rabbi Elazar to make learning an experience of constant agreement. This means that even when aware of the dangers, one cannot forsake the back-and-forth argumentation that constitutes the lifeblood of learning. No option exists to forsake debate, but only to try and ensure that the debate remains respectful and dignified.

The Maharsha adds two more insights. Rabbi Yoḥanan tore his garment after the encounter with Rabbi Elazar. Apparently, the failure of Reish Lakish's substitute powerfully brought home the magnitude of the loss, and Rabbi Yoḥanan therefore rent his garments. He also notes that other Talmudic sources mention the forty-nine aspects of each Torah idea. When Rabbi Yoḥanan said an idea, Reish Lakish raised twenty-four questions and Rabbi Yoḥanan responded with twenty-four answers, meaning that all forty-nine aspects of the idea had been addressed. Thus, the back and forth between these two giants had truly led to the deepest and most comprehensive

understanding of Torah. The challenge to have such productive interactions, while avoiding any harsh or insulting words, beckons to each of us.