

# R' Yochanan and Reish Lakish

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The Gemara records the story of the relationship between R' Yochanan and Reish Lakish. The narrative begins before Reish Lakish's rise to eminence:

הָוּוּ קָא סְהִי דִּי יוֹחָנָן בְּיַרְדֵּן – **R' Yochanan was swimming in the Jordan river.** תְּזַיִיחַ רִישׁ לָקִישׁ – **Reish Lakish, who was then a highwayman, saw him, and jumped into the Jordan after him.**<sup>1</sup> אִמְרַי לֵיהּ – [R' Yochanan] beheld this display of vitality and **said to him, “Your strength belongs to the Torah!”** אִמְרַי לֵיהּ – [Reish Lakish] **said to him, שׁוּפְרֵךְ – “Your beauty belongs to women!”** אִמְרַי לֵיהּ – [R' Yochanan] **said to him, I – יהִיבְנָא לְךָ אַחוּתִי – If you will repent your ways, who is more beautiful than I.** אִמְרַי לֵיהּ – [Reish Lakish] **accepted this upon himself.** בְּעֵי לְמִיָּהֲדַר לְאַתּוּיִי מֵאַנְיָה – [Reish Lakish] then **wanted to return to retrieve his clothes, but was unable** to muster the strength to do so.<sup>2</sup> אַחֲרָיִיהּ וְאַתְנִיִּיהּ – [R' Yochanan] afterwards **taught him Scripture and Mishnah and made him into a great man.**

The narrative continues:

הָוּוּ מִפְּלִגֵּי בֵּי מִדְּרָשָׁא – **they were disputing** the following point in the study hall: The Mishnah states:<sup>3</sup> הַסִּיף וְהַסֶּכֶן וְהַפְּגִיוֹן – **THE SWORD AND THE KNIFE AND THE HUNTING-SPEAR** – **AND THE** military **SPEAR AND THE HAND-SICKLE AND THE HARVESTING SICKLE:** מֵאַיִמְתִּי מִקְּבִלִין טוֹמָא – **From what point are they capable of becoming tamei [impure]?** מִשְׁעַת גַּמְר מְלֹאכְתָּן – **It is from the time of the completion of their production.** וּמֵאַיִמְתִּי גַמְר מְלֹאכְתָּן – **And when is the completion of their production?** רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן אָמַר – **R' Yochanan says: מִשִּׁצְרַפָּס בְּכַבְשָׁן – From when [the metal utensils] are**

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<sup>1</sup> He mistook him for a woman since he had no beard (*Metzudas David*).

<sup>2</sup> The Torah tends to weaken the [physical] strength of its students (*Sanhedrin* 26b). Here, even though Reish Lakish had not yet begun his studies, he had nevertheless accepted the yoke of Torah upon himself. This alone made him incapable of leaping as he had done before (*Rashi*).

<sup>3</sup> The following list of utensils appears in *Keilim* 13:1 (see *Rashi*) in regard to the utensils' respectability to *tumah* when they become broken. R' Yochanan and Reish Lakish, however, discussed a different point concerning these items.

**tempered in a furnace.**<sup>4</sup> ריש לקיש אמר – **Reish Lakish says:**  
 אָמַר לִיהּ – **From when they are polished with water.**<sup>5</sup> משיצחצחון במים  
 – [R' Yochanan] said to [Reish Lakish]: – **A thief knows the tools of his thievery.**<sup>6</sup> אָמַר לִיהּ – [Reish Lakish]  
**replied to him,** ומאי אהנת לי – **“And how have you benefited me?”**  
 There among the thieves, they called me ‘Rabbi,’ i.e. I  
 was their leader, לי – **and here they call me ‘Rabbi.’**<sup>7</sup> אָמַר  
 לִיהּ – [R' Yochanan] said to him, אהנאי לך – **“I benefited you**  
**in that I brought you under the wings of the Divine Presence!”**

R' Yochanan became disheartened because of  
 Reish Lakish's response. חלש ריש לקיש – **Reish Lakish became seriously**  
**ill.**<sup>8</sup> [R' Yochanan's] sister, who was Reish Lakish's wife,  
 came before R' Yochanan. קא בכיא – **She cried** and pleaded with him to  
 pray for Reish Lakish's recovery. אמרה ליה – **She said to him,** עשה בשביל  
 בני – **“Act for the sake of my children; prevent their father from dying!”**  
 [R' Yochanan] replied to her with this verse:<sup>9</sup> עזבה יתומיך אני – אמר לה  
 עשה בשביל – **“Leave your orphans; I will sustain [them].”** אחיה

<sup>4</sup> These objects reach the proper hardness by being successively heated and cooled: When this annealing process is finished, so is their production.

<sup>5</sup> Reish Lakish contends that since these metal utensils are weapons, their frightening appearance is central to their purpose. Thus, their production is not finished until they possess the glint that will strike fear into the hearts of future victims (*Maharsha*).

<sup>6</sup> “I must therefore bow to your expertise in this area.” R' Yochanan thus conceded that Reish Lakish was correct (*Rabbeinu Channeh*). R' Yochanan meant no disparagement whatsoever of Reish Lakish (*Maharsha, Etz Ibsen*). However, Reish Lakish mistook his words for a very personal insult.

<sup>7</sup> *Etz Yosef* maintains that Reish Lakish really meant to say, “Why have you aggrieved me?” (אָהַנְתָּ from the word הוֹנָאָה.) Reish Lakish's response is then explained as follows: Why have you made reference to my earlier evil deeds, which are a source of embarrassment to me? If it is because you deem my repentance to have been insincere, then you must think my continued presence here in the *beis medrash* is due to the prestige I receive; this is not so. I used to receive the same honors from my hand of thieves. If I am still here, then, it must be that I have severed all connections with the past and I am here for the Torah: Why then have you aggrieved me? (cf. *Tosafos* ד"האי תוס' (הדרת בכ כו').

Unfortunately, R' Yochanan understood Reish Laldsh in this vein: What have you done for me? (אָהַנְתָּ from the word הוֹנָאָה.) I was a “rabbi” when you first met me and I am a rabbi now; nothing has changed! To R' Yochanan's ears, Reish Lakish was belittling the importance of all his teachings and the Torah itself. R' Yochanan was thus compelled to make the obvious rejoinder.

<sup>8</sup> [As Divine retribution for having pained R' Yochanan.]

<sup>9</sup> *Jeremiah* 49:11,

אלמנותי – She said, “**Act for the sake of my impending widowhood!**”  
הוא – אמר לה – **“And let your widows trust in me.”**<sup>10</sup>

והוא – **Shimon ben Lakish passed away.**<sup>11</sup> נח נפשיה דר' שמעון בן לקיש  
– **But R' Yochanan grieved after him considerably.**<sup>12</sup> קא מצטער ר' יוחנן בתריה טובא  
– מאן ליזיל ליתביה לדעתיה, **The Rabbis said,** – אמרו רבן –  
– **“Who shall go to bring comfort to his mind? – R' Elazar ben Pedas should go, for his scholarship is brilliant.”**<sup>13</sup> ניזיל רבי אלעזר בן פדת  
– **[R' Elazar ben Pedas] went and sat before him.** דמחדדין שמעתתיה,  
– **To everything R' Yochanan would say,** – אמר ליה, **[R' Elazar ben Pedas] told him,**  
– אמר – **“We learned a Baraisa that supports you.”** – תניא דמסייעא לך  
– **[R' Yochanan] eventually said to him,** את כבר לקישה – **“You are supposed to be like bar Lakisha, i.e. Reish Lakish? With bar Lakisha, whenever I would say something, he would pose twenty-four difficulties to me – and I would give him twenty-four solutions, and as a result of the give-and-take the subject became clear. However, you constantly say, ‘We learned a Baraisa that supports you.’ Of what use is this? Do not I already know that I have said well?!”**

– **[R' Yochanan] would go about and tear his clothes,** והוא קא אזיל וקרע מאניה  
– **and would cry and say,** היכא את בר לקישה – **“Where are you, bar Lakisha! Where are you, bar Lakisha!”** עד דשף דעתיה  
– **and he would scream** – והוא קא צוח – **until his sanity wore away from him.** – בעו רבנן רחמי עליה – [מיניה]

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> R' Yochanan was unwilling to forgive Reish Lakish this [perceived ] offense because of its fundamentally destructive nature. If a student is disdainful of his rabbi, then he has removed himself from that rabbi's care and guidance. Indeed, he has thereby brought about his own end, as the Midrash says (*Vayikra Rabbah* 11:8): The Jewish people without their elders is like a bird without wings. Thus, in a sense, the very existence of the nation was endangered by this act of contempt, and that was unforgivable (*R' Chaim Shnmulewitz, Sichos Mussar, 5733 §13*).

<sup>12</sup> He regretted causing Reish Lakish's death, since there was no other conscientious disciple like him (*Rashi*).

<sup>13</sup> Literally: his studies are sharp.

**The Rabbis prayed for mercy on him ונח נפשיה – and [R' Yochanan] passed away.<sup>14</sup>**

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<sup>14</sup> Why did the Rabbis pray for his death and not his recovery? Because it would have been of no avail. The bond between R' Yochanan and Reish Lakish was so strong that it was central to R' Yochanan's very existence. Thus, its severance was a mortal blow; even had R' Yochanan recovered, he would just have continued to pine after Reish Lakish, and would very soon have lost his mind again. The Rabbis thus had no choice but to pray for his passing (*R' Chaim Shmulevitz, Sichos Mussar* 5731 §19).