**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Rabbinic Tales: In the Talmud and in Chasidut**

**By Rav Dr. Yonatan Feintuch**

**Shiur #36: Stories of Disciples' Attachment to Rabbis, and the "Mirror" Effect (2)**

In the previous *shiur*, we began to explore the story of R. Yochanan and Reish Lakish.

For the purposes of continuing the discussion, I quote it again here, in accordance with MS Hamburg 165 (part of the story is omitted since we will not be treating it here):

One day [R. Yochanan] was bathing in the Jordan River. Reish Lakish [who was the leader of a gang of bandits] saw him and, mistaking him for a woman, jumped into the Jordan after him: he thrust his spear into the Jordan and jumped to the other side of the Jordan. When R. Yochanan saw R. Shimon ben Lakish, he said to him, “Your strength is fit for Torah [study]!” He replied, “Your beauty is fit for women.” R. Yochanan said to him: “If you return [to Torah], I will give you my sister in marriage, who is more beautiful than I am.” Reish Lakish accepted this upon himself. Then he wanted to jump back out of the river to retrieve his clothes, but he was unable to. [R. Yochanan] taught him Torah, and Mishna, and turned him into a great man.

One day there was a dispute in the *beit midrash* concerning the *beraita* that teaches: “A sword, a knife, a dagger, a hand sickle, and a harvest sickle – from what stage do they become susceptible to ritual impurity? From the time of the completion of their manufacture.” When is their manufacture completed? R. Yochanan said: From when they are fired in the furnace. Reish Lakish said: From when one scours them in water.

R. Yochanan said: “A bandit knows his banditry!” He replied: “Of what benefit have you been to me? There [in my previous life, as a bandit,] they called me ‘rabbi’ [i.e., ‘Leader’], and here [in the *beit midrash*], too, they call me ‘rabbi.’” (He answered, “I have not benefited you at all.”)

R. Yochanan was upset, and Reish Lakish fell ill…

Reish Lakish’s soul left him. R. Yochanan was greatly pained over his loss.

The Sages said: “What can we do to console him? Let us send R. Elazar ben Pedat, whose statements are sharp [i.e., he is clever], and have him sit before him.”

They brought R. Elazar ben Pedat and sat him before [R. Yochanan]. Whatever [R. Yochanan] said, [R. Elazar ben Pedat] would say, “There is a teaching that supports your opinion.” [R. Yochanan] said to him, “Is this then what I need? The son of Lakish – whatever I said, he would raise twenty-four difficulties against me! And I would answer him with twenty-four answers, until the *halakha* was clarified. But you say, ‘There is a teaching that supports your opinion’!? Do I not know that what I am saying is correct?!”

[R. Yochanan] went and cried out at the gate of the son of Lakish, “Where are you?” Until he lost his mind. The Sages prayed for [Divine] mercy, and his soul left him.”

As discussed in the previous *shiur*, Reish Lakish represents qualities that are different from – even the opposite of – those of R. Yochanan. It is perhaps precisely for this reason that R. Yochanan seeks to draw him into the *beit midrash* and into his own family. The contrast between them creates a productive partnership in which they complement one another.

But then comes the dispute in the *beit midrash*, concerning the point at which the manufacture of various metal weapons is considered to be complete. R. Yochanan and Reish Lakish take opposing views on this issue. What does each opinion express?

Various interpretations have been offered for the symbolic meaning of the two opinions in this dispute, which looks like any other regular halakhic controversy. Before addressing any specific interpretation, attention should be paid to a point that is raised by Ido Chevroni.[[1]](#footnote-1) Following a review of other Rabbinic sources pertaining to the impurity of metal vessels and weapons, Chevroni shows that the opinions expressed by R. Yochanan and Reish Lakish in the story do not seem to reflect real halakhic positions on the question of when metal vessels are considered to be complete and able to contract ritual impurity. He concludes that their statements have literary and symbolic rather than halakhic value. Working off our discussion in the previous *shiur* about the first encounter between R. Yochanan and Reish Lakish, we might view the dispute between them as an expression of their contrasting views regarding the process that Reish Lakish has undergone, or should undergo, from his past as a bandit to his new life as a sage.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In the first encounter between them, R. Yochanan was able to promote a channeling of Reish Lakish's qualities in a different, positive direction. Now, however, he seems to be backtracking on that approach, perhaps in a moment of weakness. His view that the weapon requires firing in a furnace in order to be complete may be understood as a symbolic expression of the need, in his opinion, for Reish Lakish to undergo a fundamental change that will "consume" and eradicate his previous life, including even the innermost core of his personality which led him to that life. Reish Lakish, on the other hand, maintains that "scouring in water" will suffice; in other words, he can retain the same core personality which is perhaps not unfit in and of itself, but rather requires a "scouring" – an external cleaning and polishing of the exterior of that core, such that it is expressed in study rather than in highway robbery. Reish Lakish's words match the impression that arises from their first encounter: that his transition to the *beit midrash* comes, with the encouragement of R. Yochanan, via his plunge into the waters of the Jordan – which may be alluded to in the expression "scouring in water." R. Yochanan had been willing to accept, in that original encounter, the idea that "Your strength is fit for Torah" – i.e., that the core of who Reish Lakish is, the energy and power expressed outwardly in his banditry, could remain and could be expressed in a more refined and positive way in the *beit midrash*, as a tool for learning.

Now, it seems that, perhaps due to the heat of the argument, R. Yochanan is taking a different approach. He focuses on what Reish Lakish brings with him from his previous life – his proficiency and expertise in weapons – and instead of seeing how this knowledge serves him in defining the truth within Torah discourse (rather than in violence), he takes Reish Lakish back to the world of banditry. Instead of viewing Reish Lakish's energy as integrating into and contributing to the *beit midrash*, he characterizes it as serving only violence. Attention should be paid to the fact that this is the first time the label "bandit" appears in the story. Up until this point, it has not been used explicitly in relation to Reish Lakish; we have only encountered his great physical strength, which may allude to his occupation. The explicit mention of his banditry in the past strikes a harsh note, and it is significant that it happens only now – because by using this term at this point, R. Yochanan turns it into a label that creates an identity rather than just describing an occupation. It becomes a matter of inner essence rather than external expression.

This labeling has the effect of distancing Reish Lakish from the *beit midrash*, as we might understand from his response: “Of what benefit have you been to me? There [among the bandits] they called me ‘rabbi’ [i.e., Leader], and here [likewise] I am called ‘rabbi.’” Does R. Yochanan address this question? In the version that appears in the printed Gemara, R. Yochanan’s response is, “I benefited you in that I brought you under the wings of the Divine Presence.” A number of alternate versions are found in different manuscripts. In the version cited above, translated from MS Hamburg 165, R. Yochanan’s response appears in parentheses, since it is not part of the text itself, but rather was added in between the lines. In a fragment from the Cairo Geniza,[[3]](#footnote-3) Reish Lakish’s question is left hanging in the air. It seems that in the original version of the story, there was indeed no response on the part of R. Yochanan. If this is so, perhaps scholars added different answers in later versions in an attempt to soften somewhat the conclusion of the dialogue, since the unanswered question leaves a strong sense of an abyss.

Reish Lakish’s statement responds to R. Yochanan’s harsh words and echoes the perception arising from it: that what he has received in the *beit midrash* is merely an external “shell.” R. Yochanan addresses him for the first time using the label “bandit.” For this reason, Reish Lakish, too, defines what he has received in the *beit midrash* by means of a title – ‘rabbi.’ Previously, the narrator notes that R. Yochanan made him a “great man.” This might be meant in the true, essential sense – inner greatness – or in the outer sense of honor and status. Reish Lakish’s response echoes R. Yochanan’s words, with their implied lack of recognition of the possibility that the process that Reish Lakish has undergone has (or will) channel his inner forces in a positive and meaningful direction. R. Yochanan’s words imply that the change has involved only the outer layer, which surrounds a defective inner core. Thus, Reish Lakish’s retort, too, is on the level of external status. In this dimension, there is no advantage to the *beit midrash*, since he was regarded as an important, leading figure (‘rabbi’) in his previous life, too.

**A Different Interpretation – *Sinai* vs. *Oker Harim***

A slightly different way of understanding R. Yochanan’s words is offered by Yaffa Zilkah.[[4]](#footnote-4) She argues, inter alia following a comparison with the story from the *Yerushalmi* (*Megilla* 1:11) mentioned in the previous *shiur*, that a central axis of our narrative is that of “Sinai” vs. “*oker harim*” (uprooter of mountains). R. Yochanan is referred to in the brief story in the *Yerushalmi* as “Sinai,” symbolizing the faithful, meticulous, precise transmission of tradition. Concerning Reish Lakish, on the other hand, we read (*Bavli Sanhedrin* 24a) that “When one sees Reish Lakish studying in the *beit midrash*, [it is] as though he is uprooting mountains and grinding them against each other.” In the *Yerushalmi*’s story, R. Yochanan ultimately manages to bring these two tracks together; his return to the *beit midrash* after an extended absence is formulated as a promise that “Tomorrow, **Sinai** will come down and **bring you a new insight**.” But in the *Bavli*, R. Yochanan is incapable – at least at the moment of conflict with Reish Lakish – of creating that harmony. According to Zilkah’s understanding of the story, when R. Yochanan offers his position – “when they are fired in a furnace” – he is hinting that Reish Lakish should submit to him, the teacher:

When a vessel is fired in the furnace, an action of refinement and fusion takes place, whereby the substance ‘yields’ [submits] while it is pliable, accepting the form that is stamped on it.

The submission that R. Yochanan seeks is expressed in his desire that Reish Lakish accept the halakhic position he is conveying – which has been passed down to him by the tradition over generations – and is also symbolized in the formulation of that position itself: “from when they are fired in a furnace.” It is a submission to tradition, a process of study in which the disciple merely receives the teachings of the rabbi. But this goes against R. Yochanan’s original approach, at the beginning of the story, in which he was willing to enlist Reish Lakish’s extraordinary power in the endeavor of Torah study – not in such a way as to dominate him completely, but rather allowing a productive combination of their respective strengths. Zilkah’s interpretation offers another possible view of R. Yochanan’s inability to accept Reish Lakish as a study partner who challenges him by means of the strengths that characterize him – the inner power which, in the *beit midrash*, finds expression as independence and creativity in halakhic discourse.

In the part of the story that is not cited above, R. Yochanan reassures his sister concerning the death of Reish Lakish, who is her husband, with a verse from the prophecy of Yirmeyahu: “Leave your orphaned children – I will rear them – and let your widows trust in Me” (*Yirmeyahu* 49:11). As Chevroni[[5]](#footnote-5) points out, if we look at the broader context of this verse, we see that it is part of a prophecy of wrath directed at Esav/Edom:

Of Edom: …for I bring the calamity of Esav upon him, the time that I shall punish him… If grape-gatherers came to you, would they not leave some gleaning grapes? If thieves [came] by night, would they not destroy until they had enough? But I have made Esav bare, I have uncovered his secret places, and he shall not be able to hide himself; his seed is spoiled, and his brethren, and his neighbors, and he is not.” (*Yirmeyahu* 49:7-10)

It is interesting, in the context of our story, that the punishment that will befall Esav is described using the imagery of robbery and theft – recalling Reish Lakish’s past as a bandit. More specifically, it is interesting to consider the parallels between Yaakov and Esav, on one hand, and R. Yochanan and Reish Lakish, on the other: Reish Lakish recalls Esav, with his qualities of physical strength and life energy, while R. Yochanan’s beauty and delicacy recall Yaakov. The qualities that are inherent in Esav could have been channeled, following a process of refinement, in a productive direction in the *beit midrash*, but R. Yochanan is truly unable to forge within himself the connection between Esav’s outer “shell” and his inner essence, in order to enable this productive channeling to occur. Instead, he demands a “firing in the furnace” – which likewise recalls a verse from the prophets dealing with Yaakov and Esav: “And the house of Yaakov shall be a fire, and the house of Yosef a flame, and the house of Esav for stubble, and they shall kindle in them, and devour them…” (*Ovadya* 1:18). This is the tragedy of our story.

**Chasidic/Psychological Interpretation of the Story**

It is also possible to offer a different interpretation of the dynamic between R. Yochanan and Reish Lakish, inspired by a reading of the story proposed by R. Tzadok ha-Kohen of Lublin.[[6]](#footnote-6) R. Tzadok introduces the idea of a “mirror” effect, based on an earlier Chasidic concept he cites: “For souls [minds] are like mirrors, as is known.” In his interpretation, when Reish Lakish expresses his perception of R. Yochanan’s words as offensive, he is in fact reflecting his own inner state – demonstrating that indeed, he has not completed the transformative process.[[7]](#footnote-7) I do not believe this reflects the plain meaning of the narrative, but it is an interesting proposal of an exegetical tool which we might formulate slightly differently.

The Chasidic principle behind R. Tzadok’s interpretation was taught by the Ba’al Shem Tov:

To offer a metaphor: just as a person who looks in a mirror will see his deficiency etc. – thus someone who sees a deficiency in his fellow knows that some measure of that deficiency exists within himself, too, etc. (*Keter Shem Tov* part I, 116)

Elsewhere, we find a more detailed teaching of the same idea:

Therefore, when a person sees someone else doing something bad, or when he is told about someone who did something bad, he can be sure that he has some smattering of that same wrong himself. Even if he is a *tzaddik*, he still contains some tiny measure of that same matter, and the blessed God arranged for him to see this sight, or to hear this report, so that he will notice and repent, repairing that deficiency… and he has to repair that matter within himself, and thereby the person who is doing the evil will also achieve repair, etc. (*Ba’al Shem Tov al ha-Torah*, *Bereishit* 127)

Reish Lakish’s harsh reaction reflects, like a mirror, the offense that he feels at R. Yochanan’s words. But even before that, it must be noted that when R. Yochanan calls Reish Lakish a “bandit,” identifying the “banditry” element within him, he is actually reflecting a violent facet within himself.[[8]](#footnote-8) Thus, the mirroring here has a negative, tragic effect. Based on the words of the Ba’al Shem Tov, R. Yochanan could have acted differently: upon identifying the violent place within Reish Lakish’s personality, he should have seen his own notice of it as indication of a similar quality within himself. Had he acted to repair that place within himself, he could have had a positive influence on Reish Lakish, too.[[9]](#footnote-9)

This interpretation, unlike the first interpretation of the story proposed above, views Reish Lakish’s violent nature as an inner deficiency that indeed requires correction as part of the process of his integration into the *beit midrash*. However, the path to correction passes through R. Yochanan’s identification of an aspect that is in some way similar, albeit of a different intensity, within himself. Perhaps in the heat of the dispute between them, R. Yochanan misses this opportunity, and thus the possibility of repair is left unrealized.

In the next *shiur*, we will look at situations of disciples being drawn to teachers and the transformations that may transpire, this time from the perspective of Chasidic stories.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

1. I. Chevroni, "*Sippur Rabbi Yochanan ve-Reish Lakish le-Or Shibbutzo be-Machzor Sippurei Rabbi Elazar ben Rabbi Shimon* (*Bavli* *Bava Metzia* 83a-84a)," *JSIJ* 22 (2022), pp. 10-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A variation on this interpretation, which likewise views the dispute as centering around the process that a "*ba'al teshuva*" should undergo, but takes the discussion in a different direction, is introduced in an earlier article by Chevroni: I. Chevroni, "*Zona ve-Listim be-Beit ha-Midrash*," *Tekhelet* 31 (5768), 73-89. He develops the idea further in the article cited above (fn. 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Oxford: Heb. c. 17/69-78. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Y. Zilkah, “*Gilgulo shel Sippur – Bein Metzi’ut le-Idiologia: Iyyun Masheveh be-Sipppur Rabbi Yochanan ve-Reish Lakish bi-Yerushalmi u-be-Bavli*,” *Asufot* 4 (5773), p. 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See above, fn. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. His interpretation is cited and explained at length and in depth in an article by S. Kassirer, “’*Ha-Nefashot ke-Mar’ot*’ – *Hebetim Psichologiim be-Machloktam ha-Achrona shel Rabbi Yochanan ve-Reish Lakish, al pi Rabbi Tzadok ha-Kohen mi-Lublin*,” *Mikhlol* 29 (5773). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. R. Tzadok’s observations concerning the process of mirroring that takes place in the story is developed further and in greater detail (see Kassirer, above, fn. 6), including an interpretation of the story that is far removed from the plain meaning, but fascinating. The discussion here looks at just one point from R. Tzadok’s discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. We might also note here the teaching in the Gemara that “One who embarrasses/offends his fellow [literally, ‘causes his face to turn white’] is considered as having spilled blood” (*Bavli*, *Bava Metzia* 58b). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Prof. Mordechai Rotenberg develops this idea as a therapeutic tool which he refers to as the “double mirror.” See, for example, M. Rotenberg, *Dialogue with Deviance*, Philadelphia, 1983; M. Rotenberg, *Kiyym be-Sod ha-Tzimtzum*, Jerusalem, 1990, p. 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)