



Talmud Tales – Session 8 - Multi-Dimensional Relationships

BT Baba Metzia 84a

One day R. Yochanan was swimming in the Jordan. Reish Lakish [then a famous gladiator] saw him and jumped into the Jordan after him. [Yochanan] said to him, “May your strength be for the Torah.”

Reish Lakish said to him, “May your beauty be for women.” Yochanan said, “If you repent, I will give you my sister, who is more beautiful than I am.”

Reish Lakish accepted the agreement. But he wanted to go back and get his weapons and couldn't [lift them up]. Yochanan read Scripture with Reish Lakish, repeated Mishnah with him, and turned him into a major authority.

One day there was a dispute in the beit midrash (house of learning): As to a sword, knife, dagger, spear, hand-saw, and scythe — at what point in making them do they become susceptible to become unclean? It is when the process of manufacturing them has been completed [at which point they are deemed useful and therefore susceptible]. And when is the process of manufacturing them completed?

R. Yochanan said, “When one has tempered them in the crucible (*a heat-resistant container in which materials can be heated to very high temperatures*).”

Reish Lakish said, “When one has furbished them in water.” [later in the process]

Yochanan said to him, “A robber is an expert at robbery.”

Reish Lakish said to him, “So what good did you ever do for me? When I was a robber, people called me, ‘my lord’ [lit.: rabbi], and now people call me ‘my lord.’”

Yochanan replied, “I’ll tell you what good I’ve done for you, I brought you under the wings of the Presence of God.”

R. Yochanan was offended, and Reish Lakish fell ill. Yochanan’s sister [Lakish’s wife] came to him weeping, saying to him, “[Heal my husband,] do it for my children’s sake!”

He said to her, “‘Leave your fatherless children. I will preserve them alive’ (Jer. 49:11).”

“Then do it on account of my widowhood!”

He said to her, “‘and let your widows trust in me’ (Jer. 49:11).”

Reish Lakish died, and R. Yochanan was much distressed afterward. Rabbis said, “Who will go and restore his spirits? Let R. Eleazar b. Pedat go, because his traditions are well-honed.” He went and took a seat before him. At every statement that R. Yochanan made, he comments, “There is a teaching that supports your view.”

Yochanan said to him, “Are you like Reish Lakish?! When I would state something, Reish Lakish would raise questions against my position on twenty-four grounds, and I would find twenty-four solutions, and it naturally followed that the tradition was broadened, but you say to me merely, ‘There is a teaching that supports your view.’ Don’t I know that what I say is sound?!”

So he went on tearing his clothes and weeping, “Where are you, Reish Lakish, where are you, Reish Lakish,” and he cried until his mind turned from him. The rabbis asked mercy for him, and he died.