

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

THE SOUND OF ONE HAND CLAPPING IN THE THE YERUSHALMI

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Well, you study enough Yerushalmi, I guess you see it all. I thought only eastern religions had the "sound of one hand clapping" but we have it here in the Yerushalmi. Of course, it's not exactly the tranquil phenomenon of Buddhism that we find in the Yerushalmi.

Under question is the case of High Priest who's been caught sinning. The sages agree that the High Priest can be punished; the question is if he can be removed from office.

Reish Lakish starts us off:

Reish Lakish said: A ruler who sinned, they administer lashes to him by the decision of a court of three judges.

Can the High Priest then be restored to office?

Said Rabbi Haggai: By Moses! If we put him back into office, he will kill us! Rabbi Yudan Hanasi heard Reish Lakish's teaching and was outraged. He sent guards to arrest Reish Lakish. Reish Lakish fled to the watchman's lodge, and some say, to Kfar Hittayya (a town near Tiberius).

The next day, Rabbi Yochanan went up to the meetinghouse and Rabbi Yudan HaNasi went there, too. He asked Rabbi Yochanan: Why does my master not state a teaching of Torah?

Rabbi Yochanan began to clap with one hand.

Rabbi said to him: Do people clap with only one hand?

He said to him: No. For Ben Lakish is not here. Just as one hand cannot clap, I cannot teach Torah without my colleague Reish Lakish. (Y. Sanhedrin 2:1)

This passage shows the relationship between Reish Lakish and Rabbi Yochanan at its best. This is what the pair of them lose when they "break up," which is the most accurate description of their falling out. It's not only the two sages who lose out, but the entire house of meeting loses out from the interchange between the two.

Discussion Questions:

1. I know it's dangerous to read any rabbinic passage as if it were historically accurate, but it certainly seems that Reish Lakish's words carry a lot of weight if he's threatened with incarceration because of them. In this sense, Rabbi Yohanan's refusal to teach with his study partner signals another power play. So I invite you to speculate and "fill in the blanks," i.e., write some midrash. What did Rabbi Haggai and Rabbi Yudan do to make them so fearful of getting punished and/or bounced out of office? Can you imagine who took Reish Lakish in when he was on the run?
2. This story underscores the importance of having a study partner. Do you have one? If not, try and get one and make yourself a friend in the process. If you have a study partner, please write in and tell people how it changes your study for the better.
3. Clearly, Rabbi Yohanan is not just Reish Lakish's friend, he's his advocate, as well. Could the "study partner" paradigm work in other settings, e.g., professional colleagues, in college?

P.S. I'll admit it; the corresponding passage in chapter 3 of Horayot in the Bavli is even more fun than this one. Rabbi Joshua knows about Haley's comet!