

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted July 7, 2001 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

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Exciting Developments in Long-Term, Intensive Talmud Study at Maqom!

About one year ago, I offered those who study Talmud with Maqom the option of working with me on a one-on-one basis to do research and create articles about rabbinic literature that would be posted [here](#) at Maqom. With this article, that project is bearing its first fruit. I hope you enjoy reading Rabbi Louis Rieser's research and the papers that have yet to come.

--Rabbi Judith Z. Abrams, Ph.D.

BH

INTENSE TORAH STUDY INVOLVES SACRIFICE AND BRINGS REWARDS

Dear Friends,

I have just finished a project on which I have been working for some time: reading the Bavli from front to back. In all the years which I have studied Talmud I never read it as a whole document. I hope to be sharing many of the insights in the Bavli which I have gained over the coming months.

One of the things that stood out quite clearly as I made my way through the Bavli is the enormity of the roles played by Rabbi Yohanan and Reish Lakish. Rabbi Yohanan was a brilliant scholar who was the epitome of beauty and, it is noted, he did not have facial hair. Reish Lakish was a gladiator, or some say a robber baron, and then became a sage with Rabbi Yohanan as his mentor. The relationship between these two sages was amazingly close.

One day Rabbi Yohanan was bathing in the Jordan. Reish Lakish saw him and jumped into the Jordan after him. Said he [Rabbi Yohanan] to him: Your strength should be for the Torah. He [Reish Lakish] said to him: Your beauty should be for women.

He [Rabbi Yohanan] said to him [Reish Lakish]: If you will repent, I will give you my sister [in marriage], who is more beautiful than I am. He [Reish Lakish] took it upon himself [to repent of his life as a robber]. He wanted to jump back and fetch his clothes but he was not able to do so [having accepted the weight of the "yoke of Torah", his strength was immediately sapped]. [Rabbi Yohanan] taught him Scripture and Mishnah, and made him into a great person.

One day there was an argument in the Academy [with respect to what was taught in a baraita]: A sword, a knife, a dagger, a spear, a knife-saw and a scythe-from what time [during their manufacture] can they accept ritual impurity [i.e., when are they considered whole, functioning items]? When their manufacture is finished. And at what point in time is their manufacture [considered to be] finished? Rabbi Yohanan

says: [From the time] when they are tempered in a furnace. Reish Lakish said: [From the time] when they have been polished in water. Said [Rabbi Yohanan] to [Reish Lakish]: A robber knows the tools of his trade. [Reish Lakish] said to [Rabbi Yohanan]: How have you benefited me? There [as a robber] I was called Master, and here I am called Master. [Rabbi Yohanan] said to him: I benefited you by bringing you under the wings of the Shekhinah.

Rabbi Yohanan went out of his mind and Reish Lakish became ill [on account of this contretemps]. [Rabbi Yohanan's] sister [Reish Lakish's wife] came crying and said to him: [Forgive him] for the sake of my children. He said to her: "Leave your fatherless children. I will sustain them. (Jeremiah 49:11)" Do it for the sake of my widowhood!" He said to her: "And let your widows trust in me. (Jeremiah 49:11)"

Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish died, and Rabbi Yohanan greatly regretted what had happened. Said the Rabbis: Who will go and bring him back [to reality]? Let Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat go, for his halakhot are sharp. So [Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat] went and sat before [Rabbi Yohanan]. [Regarding] every word that Rabbi Yohanan would say, [Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat] said to him: There is a baraita that supports you. [Rabbi Yohanan] said: Are you like a son of Lakisha? When I would say a word, the son of Lakisha would raise twenty-four difficulties [with it] and I would give twenty-four answers, which made the law more widespread [since it had been clarified through this rigorous process]. But you say: A baraita supports you. Do I not know that what I said was good?

[Rabbi Yohanan] went on ripping his clothes and crying and saying: Where are you, son of Lakisha? Where are you, son of Lakisha? He went on crying until his mind was gone. [So] the Rabbis prayed for him, and he died. (B. Baba Metsia 84a)

Discussion Questions:

1. This story brings up a major stumbling block for many people on their spiritual journeys: confusing spiritual energy with emotional energy. Sadly, Reish Lakish and Rabbi Yohanan were so close to each other that they could not continue the amicable disagreements which were the hallmark of their relationship. Have you ever witnessed the confusion of these two types of energy? What was the result? How might such confusion be avoided?
2. The extremely close relationship between Rabbi Yohanan and Reish Lakish brings up an issue which Howard Schwartz addresses in his book *God's Phallus*. If the sages related to God as a wife related to a husband (for example, this is the metaphorical interpretation of Song of Songs) does that mean that the sages must take on aspects of the feminine? And what impact does that have on the sages' relationships with one another and with their wives?