

Reminder on Respectful Theological Discussion

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Yeshua said to his disciples, “The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life” (John 6:63).

Words are powerful. They can heal and they can destroy. They can infuse life and they can take it away. At the 2010 Borough Park Symposium, we want to exemplify a culture of respectful theological discussion, a culture we can pass on to the next generation of leaders, a way of treating one another that honors Yeshua Adoneinu—Yeshua our Lord. How do we do this? We begin by admitting that we can all grow in this area.

With your permission, I would like to preface this reminder on respectful theological discussion by sharing with you one of the saddest stories in Rabbinic literature. Then I would like to suggest some principles that I think we can learn from it.

The Story of Resh Lakish and Rabbi Yochanan

As you know, Jews are involved in just about every profession. There have been Jewish boxers (in fact, there’s one here in New York City who has a Star of David on his trunks and is studying to be an Orthodox rabbi). There have been Jewish basketball players, Jewish gangsters, even Jewish pirates. But have you ever heard of a Jewish gladiator?

Well, the Babylonian Talmud relates the story of a Jewish gladiator named Shimon ben Lakish who was born around the year 200 C.E. We can learn a lot from this Jewish gladiator about respectful theological discussion.

Shimon knew how to use swords and knives to kill a man or a wild animal in the arena, before a crowd of cheering spectators. That is what he did. That is what gladiators do. Then one day, according to tradition, Shimon came across Rabbi Yochanan bar Nafcha, one of the leading Torah scholars of that generation. The story of their meeting is recorded in tractate Bava Mezia 84a.

Both of these men were Jews but they were from two different worlds. Despite their differences, Rabbi Yochanan took an interest in the Jewish gladiator and said, “Strength like yours should be devoted to Torah.” Rabbi Yochanan took the young man under his wing and trained him in the ways of Hashem. Shimon married Rabbi Yochanan’s sister and so these two men, from two different worlds, became part of the same family.

In time, Shimon became a famous Torah scholar in the land of Israel. People called him Resh Lakish, a nickname that perhaps pointed to his being a teacher who mastered the art of asking a good question (in Aramaic, a *kushia*) in order to challenge people to think.

In Rabbinic literature, it is said that when Resh Lakish “discussed halakhic questions it was as if he were uprooting mountains and rubbing them together” (*b. Sanh. 24a*). It appears that Resh Lakish loved truth and pursued it. He was not ashamed to step back from a position when the other person’s case was more convincing (*y. Git. 3.44d*). Resh Lakish was known for asking challenging questions. On numerous occasions, Rabbi Yochanan abandoned his own halakhic position after Resh Lakish showed him compelling reasons to do so (*y. Yoma 38a*; *y. ‘Erub. 18c*). Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish were dialogue partners (*y. Sanh. 2.19d, 20a*). A wonderful dynamic of interdependence existed between these two rabbis.

Then one day, everything changed. In the Beit Midrash, Rabbi Yochanan raised a simple halakhic question—when did metal objects like swords, knives and daggers become susceptible to ritual impurity? Rabbi Yochanan argued that they became susceptible when hardened in the furnace. Resh Lakish retorted that they became susceptible to ritual impurity when the smith dipped them in cold water. There is no evidence in the Bavli that Resh Lakish spoke in a disrespectful way. He simply had a different point of view and explained why.

But Rabbi Yochanan took the disagreement personally. His pride got the best of him. With stinging sarcasm, Rabbi Yochanan responded by reminding Resh Lakish of his contemptible background—that he had once been someone who wielded swords and daggers—and was thus the “expert” in this halakhic matter.

Rabbi Yochanan’s sharp words devastated Resh Lakish. And Resh Lakish, this gladiator turned rabbi, this powerful man, became weak and deathly sick.

Resh Lakish’s wife pleaded with her brother, Rabbi Yochanan, to help her husband. She asked him at least to pray for his healing, but Rabbi Yochanan refused. Soon after, Resh Lakish died and Rabbi Yochanan fell into a deep depression.

The Rabbis sent Elazar ben Pedat, the most impressive young scholar they could find, to study Torah with Rabbi Yochanan. They hoped that this brilliant young man would cause Rabbi Yochanan to forget his grief.

Day after day, Rabbi Elazar sat with Rabbi Yochanan. And each time the older rabbi gave his opinion, Rabbi Elazar would say, “I know another source that supports what you are saying.”

Rabbi Yochanan finally said to him, “Do you think you are like Resh Lakish? Whenever I stated an opinion, Resh Lakish would present twenty-four objections to what I said. He forced me to justify every ruling I gave, so that in the end, the subject was fully clarified. But all you do is tell me that you know another source that supports what I am saying. Don't I know myself that what I have said is right?”

Rabbi Yochanan tore his garments, and walked about weeping and crying out, “Where are you, son of Lakish?”

In the end, Rabbi Yochanan lost his mind. The rabbis pleaded with God to have mercy on him, and soon after Rabbi Yochanan died.

Principles

What can we learn from this story about respectful theological discussion?

1. Words can kill. This is the story of a prominent rabbi who killed another prominent rabbi with his words.

Sadly, this is not the only instance of a death like this in Jewish history. Indeed, the counting of the omer—the season we are presently in—is an annual time on the Jewish calendar to remember other rabbis who perished because of how they treated one another. The Babylonian Talmud explains: “Rabbi Akiva had *twelve thousand pairs of disciples* between Gabbath and Antipatris. All died during his lifetime, at the same time, between Passover and Shavuot, because they did not treat one another with respect” (*b. Yebam. 62b*).¹

What can we learn from these Talmudic stories? They teach us the importance of communicating respect for one another and choosing our words wisely. Rabbi Jacob Telushkin writes:

An old Jewish teaching compares the tongue to an arrow. “Why not another weapon, a sword, for example?” one rabbi asks. “Because,” he is told, “if a man unsheathes his sword to kill his friend, and his friend pleads with him and begs for mercy, the man may be mollified and return the sword to its scabbard. But an arrow, once it is shot, cannot be returned, no matter how much one wants to.”²

This principle applies not only to what we say in these sessions but also to what we say in private venues—at meals, in the hallway, in our hotel rooms, in emails we send during and after the symposium, as well as in our blogs and newsletters. Words are arrows. Once released, we cannot take them back.

It is perfectly okay to express disagreement with another’s point of view, but we should do it in a kind way and never invalidate the argument by invalidating the person, as Rabbi Yochanan did.

2. Let us remember that Resh Lakish was a gladiator. Physically, he was a powerful man. He must have seemed imposing. But in reality he was vulnerable. He quickly became ill because

¹ Cf. *Gen. Rab.* 61.3; *Eccles. Rab.* 11.6. See Tzvi Y. Rotberg, *Sfiras Haomer* (New York: Moznaim, 1983), 84-90.

² Joseph Telushkin, *Words That Hurt, Words That Heal: How to Choose Words Wisely and Well* (New York: Harper, 1996), xx.

of Rabbi Yochanan's words. Some of us here—especially the New Yorkers and Israelis—may outwardly appear thick skinned and tough. But the reality is very different. Like lobbing a grenade, the words we speak can quickly blow a hole in this veneer and do great damage to the soul. Resh Lakish was killed by the words of someone very close to him, by a brother. We are *klal Yisrael*. We are brothers and sisters in the body of Messiah. Let us not murder one another with our words.

If we blow it and make the mistake of wounding someone with our words wrongfully, we should not let our pride get the best of us, as was the case with Rabbi Yochanan. We should repent immediately.

3. Rabbi Yochanan loved truth but on this particular occasion he closed the door to the possibility of learning from Resh Lakish. We need to ask the question, “Are there people in this symposium we do not want to learn from? Do we close our minds to the possibility that they can teach us?” As Russ Resnik points out, “In our passion for biblical truth in one dimension, we sometimes trample truth in another.”
4. It is said that Resh Lakish was one who uprooted mountains and rubbed or grinded them together. This is a likely reference to the extent to which he grappled with different halakhic perspectives and evaluated them in relation to one another. As Artscroll puts it, “he penetratingly analyzed the laws and showed the inconsistencies between them.” Let us be like Resh Lakish and grapple with the different perspectives shared in this symposium. Let us uproot these mountains and grind them together.
5. Resh Lakish and Rabbi Yochanan both exhibited an ability to step back from their positions when the other person's case was more convincing. Similarly, the disciples of Hillel and Shammai conceded at times that the other school was correct and changed their opinions.³ Are we able to do this? Are we willing to cross party lines at this symposium if the other person's case is more convincing?
6. Rabbi Yochanan began to think that Resh Lakish, his dialogue partner, was more of a nuisance than a blessing. And, in a sense, Rabbi Yochanan got rid of his dialogue partner by allowing him to die. But after Resh Lakish passed away, Rabbi Yochanan realized the treasure that he had lost. Rabbi Yochanan fell into a deep depression and walked about weeping and crying out, “Where are you, son of Lakish?” I want us all to look around this room. One of the wonderful things about the Borough Park Symposium is that we are leaders who do *not* see eye-to-eye on every theological issue. Truth be told, we may even at times wish in our hearts that another leader would disappear so the nuisance of their problematic teachings would go away. But our feelings do not always match our needs. When we lose our dialogue partners, and are surrounded only by the people who agree with us, we do not grow. Let us treasure each other as dialogue partners and not make the tragic mistake that Rabbi Yochanan did.

³ E.g., “The School of Hillel changed their opinion and began to teach according to the School of Shammai's ruling” (*m. 'Ed* 1.14). Cf. *Sifre Deut.* 31.

7. Finally, how can we realistically do all of this? At the root of all the principles we have been discussing is humility, the ability to condescend, to lower ourselves and think of others as better than ourselves. We can do all of this if we imitate our divine Messiah. Paul wrote in Philippians 2:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Your attitude should be the same as that of Messiah Yeshua: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Yeshua every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Yeshua the Messiah is *ADONAI*, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:3-11).