

# Why Do Jews Argue?

## Jewish Unity through the Study of Jewish Texts

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### 1. Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia (Soncino edition)

One day R. Johanan was bathing in the Jordan, when Resh Lakish saw him and leapt into the Jordan after him. Said he [R. Johanan] to him, 'Your strength should be for the Torah.'<sup>13</sup> — 'Your beauty,' he replied, 'should be for women.' 'If you will repent,' said he, 'I will give you my sister [in marriage], who is more beautiful than I.' He undertook [to repent]; then he wished to return and collect his weapons, but could not.<sup>14</sup> Subsequently, [R. Johanan] taught him Bible and Mishnah, and made him into a great man. Now, one day there was a dispute in the schoolhouse [with respect to the following. Viz.,] a sword, knife, dagger, spear, hand-saw and a scythe — at what stage [of their manufacture] can they become unclean? When their manufacture is finished.<sup>15</sup> And when is their manufacture finished? — R. Johanan ruled: When they are tempered in a furnace. Resh Lakish maintained: When they have been furnished in water. Said he to him: 'A robber understands his trade.'<sup>16</sup> Said he to him, 'And wherewith have you benefited me: there [as a robber] I was called Master, and here I am called Master.'<sup>17</sup> 'By bringing you under the wings of the Shechinah,' he retorted. R. Johanan therefore felt himself deeply hurt,<sup>18</sup> [as a result of which] Resh Lakish fell ill. His sister [sc. R. Johanan's, the wife of Resh Lakish] came and wept before him: 'Forgive him<sup>19</sup> for the sake of my son,' she pleaded. He replied: 'Leave thy fatherless children. I will preserve them alive.'<sup>20</sup> 'For the sake of my widowhood then!' 'And let thy widows trust in me,'<sup>21</sup> he assured her. Resh Lakish died, and R. Johanan was plunged into deep grief. Said the Rabbis, 'Who shall go to ease his mind? Let R. Eleazar b. Pedath go, whose disquisitions are very subtle.' So he went and sat before him; and on every dictum uttered by R. Johanan he observed: 'There is a Baraita which Supports you.' 'Are you as the son of Lakisha?'<sup>22</sup> he complained: 'when I stated a law, the son of Lakisha used to raise twenty-four objections, to which I gave twenty-four answers, which consequently led to a fuller comprehension of the law; whilst you say, "A Baraita has been taught which supports you:" do I not know myself that my dicta are right?' Thus he went on rending his garments and weeping, 'Where are you, O son of Lakisha, where are you, O son of Lakisha;' and he cried thus until his mind was turned. Thereupon the Rabbis prayed for him, and he died. (f. 84a)

(13) I.e., devoted to study. (14) His mere decision to turn to the study of the Torah had so weakened him that he lacked the strength to don his heavy equipment. (15) Before that they are not complete articles or utensils, and only such can become unclean. (16) This was quoted only proverbially, though in later times it was taken literally, and Resh Lakish was held to have been a robber. Actually, he had been a circus attendant, to which his necessitous circumstances had reduced him, and these weapons were used in the course of that calling. (Graetz, Geschichte, IV, 238, n. 6). Weiss, Dor, III, p. 83, n. 2, understands the phrase literally, but translates לַסְתָּאָה as 'thief-catcher.' If that be correct, Resh Lakish at one time helped the Roman government, just as R. Eleazar b. R. Simeon and R. Ishmael b. R. Jose had done. (17) Heb. יָרִיבִי equally applicable to a captain of a gang and a Rabbi (Rashi). (18) By the remark of Resh Lakish that he had not benefited him. (19) Lit., 'do'. (20) Jer. XLIX, 11. (21) Ibid. (22) The full name of Resh Lakish was R. Simeon b. Lakish. Weiss, Dor, II, 71 deduces from the use of Lakisha here that Lakish was not a patronym but the name of a town, בְּן־ or בְּר־ meaning 'a citizen of,' i.e., R. Simeon, a townsman of Lakish. But Bacher, Ag. der Pal. Am. I, 340, 1 defends Lakish as a patronym.

## 2. Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia (Soncino edition)

Rab Judah said in Rab's name: What is meant by, Who is the wise man, that may understand this? and who is he to whom the mouth of the Lord hath spoken, that he may declare it, why the land perisheth?1 This question2 was put by the Sages, but they could not answer it; by the prophets, but they [too] could not answer it, until the Holy One, blessed be He, Himself resolved as it is written, And the Lord said, Because they have forsaken my law which I set before them.3 Rab Judah said in Rab's name: [That means] that they did not first utter a benediction over the Torah [before studying it].4 (f. 85a-b)

(1) Jer. IX, 11. (2) Lit., 'thing'. (3) Ibid. 12. (4) The Ran in Ned. 81a explains that it is assumed that the Torah was studied; for otherwise, the question would easily have been answered by the Sages and Prophets. Yet it was studied not for its own sake but only for the preferment it might give. This is expressed by saying that they recited no benediction before studying it, i.e., it was not in itself dear to them. The selfish motive could be known to none but God.

## 3. Babylonian Talmud, Nazir (Soncino edition)

Our Rabbis taught: After the demise of R. Meir, R. Judah said to his disciples, 'Do not allow the disciples of R. Meir to enter here, for they are disputatious and do not come to learn Torah, but come to overwhelm me with citations from tradition.' (f. 49b)

## 4. Babylonian Talmud, Yoma (Soncino edition)

Woe unto the enemies of the scholars, who occupy themselves with the Torah, but have no fear of heaven! ... R. Joshua b. Levi said: What is the meaning of the Scriptural verse: And this is the law which Moses set [before the children of Israel]?26 — If he is meritorious it becomes for him a medicine of life, if not, a deadly poison. That is what Raba [meant when he] said: If he uses it the right way it is a medicine of life unto him; he who does not use it the right way, it is a deadly poison. (f. 72b)

(26) Deut. IV, 44.

## 5. R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi, Likutei Amarim – Tanya, Pt. I, Ch. 5

When any intellect perceives and understands some intellectual subject, the mind grasps that subject and encompasses it, and the subject is grasped and encompassed by, and is clothed within, the intellect that understood and perceived it. Also, the intellect is clothed within the subject at the time of intellectual comprehension and grasping. When, for example, one understands and comprehends a particular *halachah* in the *Mishnah* or *Gemara*, clearly and thoroughly, his intellect grasps and encompasses that *halachah*, and his intellect is also clothed in it at that time. Now, this *halachah* is the wisdom and Will of G-d. ... Therefore when one knows and comprehends this verdict as a *halachah* set forth in the *Mishnah* or *Gemara* or *Poskim* (the halachic codifiers), he then actually comprehends and grasps the Will and wisdom of G-d, Whom no thought can grasp, nor [can any thought grasp] His Will and wisdom, except when they clothe themselves in the *halachot* set before us. His intellect is also clothed within them. Now this is a most wonderful unity; in the physical realm there is no unity similar or parallel to it, that they should actually become one and united from every side and angle.