

# ARE YOU AN INFLUENCER OR INFLUENCED?





# ARE YOU **AN INFLUENCER**

# OR INFLUENCED?

All human beings are both influenced and influencers at the same time. We are affected by people around us and automatically affect others, sometimes without even realising.

This Shavuot booklet has been created for teenagers and young adults to further explore the theme of **independent thinking**. Do we ask enough questions? Is free thinking a sign of confidence or stubbornness? What can we learn about the way we think, challenge and seek clarity, from Jewish sources and current affairs?

The Jewish scientist Isidore Rabi won the Nobel Prize for physics in 1944. He was once asked why he became a scientist. He replied: "My mother made me a scientist without ever knowing it. Every other child would come back from school and be asked, 'What did you learn today?' But my mother used to say, 'Izzy, did you ask a good question today?' That made the difference. Asking good questions made me into a scientist."

When the Torah was given to the Jewish nation at Mount Sinai on Shavuot in the year 1313 BCE, corresponding to the Jewish year 2448, there were two parts – the Torah and the Oral Torah. The Torah was codified from the outset while the Oral Torah is a compilation of discussions, debates and insights which have been collated from the conversations of the rabbinic sages over centuries. Each of us is encouraged and empowered to add to that dialogue.

## CHAG SAMEACH!

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## THE SECTIONS OF THIS BOOKLET ARE COLOUR CODED TO REFLECT THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF CONTENT INCLUDED.

-  Section one is a **debate**.
-  Section two presents **articles to get you thinking**.
-  Section three features a passage of **Talmud** (Oral Torah) and an excerpt from **the Book of Ruth**, which we read on Shavuot.

Each section has **SOURCE** **POINTS TO PONDER** and **SUGGESTED ANSWER**

We have provided different learning styles to appeal to a range of interests and levels. Take your pick or try all three, but either way get involved in the discussion. **Your voice is important.**



# DEBATE ON INDEPENDENT THINKING

## Introduction

The following debating session is about the importance of and the Jewish view on independent thinking and asking questions.

## How does Judaism View Independent Thinking?

By Batsheva Wolf  
from Tribe

## NEWS PROVISION IN RUSSIA

### SOURCE

Washington Post article, 8 March 2022

Even as his rockets rain down on Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin is engaged in another war at home: One bent on total control of public opinion. To read or view the manipulative domestic coverage of the assault on Ukraine is to walk through a looking glass into a propagandist world of Russian heroes and Ukrainian nationalist villains. The cast of characters seems to serve one purpose: Creating a single narrative of the war for Russians built on Putin's preferred — if false — narrative. (...) In Russia, truth is getting harder to find as the penalties for speaking it grow harsher. A draconian "fake news" law signed by Putin last Friday criminalizes contradiction of the official Kremlin line on a war that Putin insists is not even a war — and merely describing it as such in Russia could now earn you a 15-year jail sentence. The tightening restrictions force some of the few remaining independent news outlets in Russia to shut down or suspend operation, even as the Kremlin moved to restrict access to foreign-based websites and social media including Facebook.

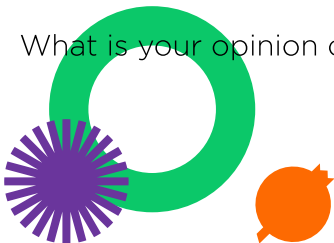
### POINTS TO PONDER

Why do you think the Russian government tries to control the news provision for the Russian population?

What is your opinion on this?

### SUGGESTED ANSWER

Some governments limit their news provision in an effort to control what their people know and think. It is the power of knowledge that they try to control, thereby trying to rule out anyone disagreeing and disobeying them in their country. 'Knowledge is power' and by limiting the knowledge of their population, these governments take away a part of their power.





# DEBATE ON INDEPENDENT THINKING

## FREEDOM OF THOUGHT IN JUDAISM

### SOURCE

From '48 Ways to Wisdom', Rabbi Noah Weinberg, [www.aish.com](http://www.aish.com)

We sometimes act in a way which contradicts our beliefs. "Questions and answers" help us uncover our own inconsistencies and rationalizations. And unless we address and resolve these issues, we will suffer from terrible confusion!

Open your eyes and mind to the irregularities in life. Don't just sit passively. If you see a contradiction, point it out.

To understand current events, you need to ask: What is the core of the issue? Why do people differ? Don't rely on analysts to give you their pre-digested opinion. You've got to do the job. Dig in and participate in the news intelligently.

There's a Jewish saying: "Nobody ever died from a question." This means don't be afraid to ask. There's nothing noble about remaining silent... and ignorant.

### POINTS TO PONDER

— What does Rabbi Weinberg tell us to do?

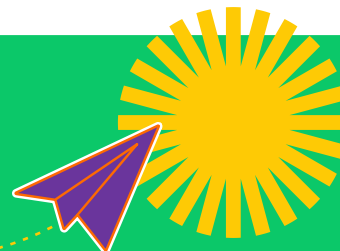
— Can you see the difference between the view of President Putin/the Kremlin and the view that Rabbi Weinberg presents?

— Which view do you support?

— Can you see good sides to both views?

### SUGGESTED ANSWER

Rabbi Weinberg encourages us to analyse what we learn and to think for ourselves. He tells us to ask questions in order to gain a deeper understanding of the issue at hand. Rabbi Weinberg used to say: "Your mind is a flashlight to lead you out of the darkness and into reality", emphasising how we should use our own intellect and mind to guide us. This is vastly different from the view of governments such as the Russian, that try to control the way people think.





# DEBATE ON INDEPENDENT THINKING

## TRUTH vs LIES

### SOURCE

Transforming the World, p.99, Rabbi Leo Dee

The Hebrew word for truth, Emet, אמת, consists of the first, middle and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet. [...] The Hebrew word for lie, Sheker, שקר, consists of three consecutive letters in the Hebrew alphabet. The letters of Emet are all letters that stand on two legs. The letters of Sheker are all letters that stand on one leg.

Say our Rabbis, the difference between truth and lies is that truth is seeing the whole picture – from beginning to end. And truth stands on two legs- it can be tested from multiple angles and it always stands up and stands the test of time. Lies are true to an extent, otherwise they'd just be stupid statements. But they're only a small part of the truth. They don't stand the test of time, nor do they stand up against investigation.

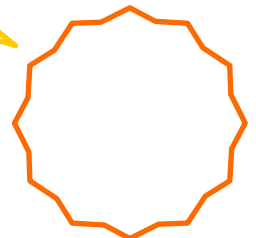
### POINTS TO PONDER

What do you think the above has to do with asking questions and free thinking?

Can you connect this to the previous source from Rabbi Noah Weinberg?

### SUGGESTED ANSWER

We believe that the Torah is truthful. It can therefore stand the test of time and even more so the test of our questions. You can fire questions at the Torah, you can analyse and challenge it, for as long as something is truthful, it will hold up.





# DEBATE ON INDEPENDENT THINKING

## SCIENCE vs BELIEF

### SOURCE

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, [www.rabbisacks.org](http://www.rabbisacks.org)

The scientist asks, the believer just believes, so the stereotype runs. What is the asking of questions if not itself a profound expression of faith in the intelligibility of the universe and the meaningfulness of human life? To ask is to believe that- somewhere- there is an answer. The fact that throughout history people have devoted their lives to extending the frontiers of knowledge is a moving demonstration of the restlessness of the human spirit and its constant desire to transcend, to climb.

### POINTS TO PONDER

- What do you think the above has to do with asking questions and free thinking?
- What do you think asking questions has to do with belief in God?
- Does Rabbi Sacks shed new light on asking questions?

### SUGGESTED ANSWER

According to Rabbi Sacks, asking questions is a show of ultimate belief that Judaism holds the answers. It is showing trust that the religion can weather being challenged.

### POINTS TO PONDER

- How do you think questions should be received?
- Did the session change your view on asking questions and independent thinking?
- Having spent time thinking about the importance of questions, take a minute to think about what questions you have that you would like to ask.

### CONCLUSION

We explored Jewish views about asking questions and thinking independently as well as how this is viewed in other countries, such as Russia. We spoke not only about how Judaism welcomes and encourages questions, but also why it does. We believe that faith does not exclude questioning, far from it, questions testify to faith.



# ARTICLES TO GET **YOU** THINKING

## JUDAISM'S CAVEAT TO INTELLECTUAL HONESTY

By **Josh Daniel** (Chinuch worker, Bnei Akiva UK)

In perhaps one of the strangest midrashim in our tradition, Moshe asks his father-in-law, Yitro, for permission to leave the land of Midian and return to Egypt. Yitro agrees that Moshe can go back to Egypt, on the condition that he lets his first-born-son (Gershom) explore idol worship. Bizarrely, Moshe agrees to this condition! Some background on who Moshe's father-in-law was might help us understand the midrash.

Another midrash tells us that Yitro had served every known idol. After coming across some evil or injustice associated with each idol, he rejected all of them in favour of serving God. Yitro came to Judaism through a moral-intellectual search for truth and justice, reminiscent of Avraham's own journey to discovering God. Yitro wanted his grandson to realise Judaism in the same way that he did and Moshe (seemingly seeing the value in such an approach) agrees.

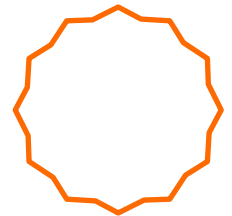
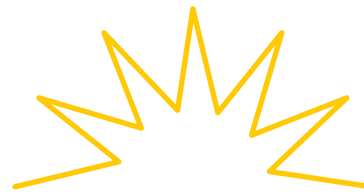
Clearly, this intellectual-moral search for truth and justice through independent thinking is an significant value in Judaism, but it also comes with an important caveat. Years later, in Sefer Shofetim (the book of Judges), we are introduced to "Yonatan son of Gershom, son of Menashe" (Judges 18:30). Yonatan and his descendants were idol worshippers. The rabbinic sages identify this character with Moshe's grandson. In other words, according to our rabbinic sages, Moshe's grandson was an idol worshipper! What went wrong with Yitro's plan for an intellectually honest moral search for Judaism? Perhaps this gives us an insight into our sages' view on intellectual honesty.

Being intellectually honest presupposes being both

intellectual and honest. Going about that search, towing along all our unintellectual dishonesties (and emotional baggage!), is not always a recipe for success. It was certainly possible for Avraham and Yitro, but does that mean it is possible for everyone?

In the Torah whenever the Shalosh Regalim (the three pilgrimage festivals – Pesach, Shavuot, Succot) are presented, the order is always Pesach, Shavuot, Succot. What is the significance of this order? Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik zt"l (1853-1918) presents the following answer. The cycle of these three festivals is representative of our life. When you are born, you are incubated, you are immersed and surrounded by spiritual things and the people you love - this is Pesach. Then comes your bar or bat mitzvah, when you accept Torah and mitzvot- this is Shavuot, which celebrates the Jewish people receiving the Torah. And finally, in your adulthood you interface and share your Torah and Judaism with other Jews and the world - this is Succot.

The three festivals represent increasing levels of exploring and interfacing our knowledge with the outside world. The most wide-ranging mitzvah of Pesach is to not eat chametz, a negative commandment, representing intellectual insularity, because Pesach is about being passive, being born and taking things in. The most pervasive mitzvah of Succot is dwelling in the succah, a positive commandment and Succot is about being active and interfacing our knowledge (and homes) with the world. Shavuot is about the in-between. It has no unique mitzvot associated with it and represents the careful balance between the two.





## POINTS TO PONDER

- Is intellectual honesty important in Judaism?
- Can you think of any other reasons that the three pilgrimage festivals might be placed in that order?
- Can you think of a prayer we say on Shabbat that conveys these very ideas?

## SUGGESTED ANSWER



A few years ago, when I attended the Chief Rabbi Shabbaton run by Tribe, Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis explained that before we ask questions like, “mi k’eloheinu?”- “who is our God?” every Shabbat, we first declare, “ein k’eloheinu” - “there is none like our God.” Only by first learning a lot about God can we begin to delve into questioning His nature. Before Yaakov “wrestled with God,” Yaakov learned about God for 14 years.” Whilst appreciating intellectual honesty as a key value for the Yitro’s and Avraham’s of the world, let’s spend our Shavuot getting to know God, in the deepest way we can so we can declare “ein k’eloheinu” with a full heart.





# ARTICLES TO GET YOU THINKING

## RELIGIOUS ZIONISM AND INDEPENDENT THINKING

By Dania Mann-Wineberg (Chinuch worker, Bnei Akiva UK)

When God offered the Torah to the Jewish People, their famous reply of

“We will do and we will hear;” “נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע” (Shemot 7:24),

denotes the importance of practical religious commitment in Judaism as a foundation for then working to understand, ‘why?’ However, it is important not to forget the ‘נִשְׁמָע’ (we will hear) part of this monumental declaration, the importance of working to understand a concept in order to then orchestrate it in a meaningful and authentic way, even if it is one that we have already been practising.

Some people reading this have grown up with the phrase ‘Religious Zionism’ ricocheting around the Jewish environments we find ourselves in. Perhaps it has been declared part of an institution’s hashkafa (religious outlook), maybe we have sung about it on machane (camp), or have been strongly encouraged to make Aliyah by people we look up to. All of these examples, whilst indicating an inherent pride in and focus on Religious Zionism, as well as demonstrating a fulfilment of ‘נַעֲשֶׂה’ (we will do), do not really do justice to the nuanced and beautiful range of independent thinkers behind the development of this intricate outlook; the ‘נִשְׁמָע’ giving rise to the abundance of opportunities for independent thinking (if it is taught properly).

Firstly, being a Zionist at all requires a substantial dose of independent thinking. We are constantly bombarded with narratives in the media and from those around us which can be biased and often contradictory. The decision to seek additional information and not take every report at face value is to think independently.

From a different angle, making the decision to firmly paste the word ‘Zionist’ next to ‘Religious’ in one’s Hashkafa can require one to consciously think in an independent way, often requiring a burst of intellectual

bravery in the process of becoming a Zionist salmon in a stream that holds no spiritual significance to the modern state of Israel.

Contemporary Religious Zionism itself was developed by independent thinkers who looked to one side to see powerful secular Zionist pioneers and looked to the other to see giants within Torah thought who did not see the development of a Jewish State as a Torah value in the context of the 19th century. Enter Rav Kalischer, Rav Gutmacher and Rabbi Yehuda Alkali, 19th Century pioneers of Religious Zionist thought. They trawled through the Torah and other religious texts, providing evidence for their belief that the return to Eretz Yisrael could be a drawn-out process, requiring initiative and hishtadlut (effort) from human beings rather than just prayer. With the turn of the 20th Century came Rav Kook (1865-1935), with his mystical model of Religious Zionism and an intrinsically spiritual process, followed later on by Rav Soloveitchik (1903-93) with his own nuanced and independent way of thinking on the topic.

Rabbi Sacks highlights the complexities in thought associated with Religious Zionism.

*“The State of Israel has in itself transformed the terms of Jewish life and brought to the forefront a series of theological questions that had laid dormant or disattended since the end of the biblical period.”* (Crisis and Covenant p. 18)

Let’s not shy away from asking complex questions or acknowledging the validity of nuance in hashka when it comes to Religious Zionism. This Shavuot, let’s address the נִשְׁמָע (we will hear) as well as the נַעֲשֶׂה (we will do). Let’s not be content with just promoting Aliyah and supporting Medinat Yisrael, but explain *why* this is important, acknowledging the value of each and every one of us as well as our chanichim, youth and students, in the mesorah (tradition) of Jewish thought.



### **POINTS TO PONDER**

- Why is Religious Zionism an important outlook within Jewish thought?
- Can you think of any Torah Sources that Religious Zionism is based on?
- Does one have to make Aliyah to be an authentic Religious Zionist?

### **SUGGESTED ANSWER**

There's a lot to research here. For now though, one cool Torah source for Religious Zionism is in the book of Ezra, where King Cyrus gives the Jewish people permission to return to the land of Israel and they do so on mass, just like today (substitute the Cyrus declaration for the Balfour declaration)! There are certainly sources explaining how settling the land of Israel is a big mitzvah. However, we also see that King Cyrus tells the Jews that are staying behind in exile that they can still contribute to the building of Israel by sending wealth over to their brothers and sisters there. Clearly even back then, making aliyah wasn't the only way to be a religious Zionist. There are many ways to support Israel!



Rabbi Yochanon encounters Reish Lakish who is chief of the bandits and encourages him to transform his physical strength into strength for Torah study. Reish Lakish marries Rabbi Yochanon's sister and the two Rabbis become study partners until one day it all goes wrong.

אֶקְרִינָהּ וְאֶתְנִינָהּ, וְשׂוּיָהּ גְּבֵרָא רַבָּא.  
וְיֵמָא חַד הוּוּ מִפְּלִגִּי בֵּי מַדְרָשָׁא:  
הַסִּיף וְהַסֵּבִין וְהַפְּגִיזוֹן וְהַרֹמַח וּמַגֵּל  
יָד וּמַגֵּל קָצִיר וְקַיִר מְאִימֵתִי מִקְּבָלִין  
טוּמְאָה? מִשְׁעַת גְּמַר מְלַאכְתָּן.

וּמְאִימֵתִי גְּמַר מְלַאכְתָּן? רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן  
אָמַר: מִשְׂוִיָרְפָם בְּכַבְּשָׁן. רִישׁ לָקִישׁ  
אָמַר: מִשְׂוִיָצֶחֶצֶחֶן בְּמַיִם. אָמַר לִיה: לְסֻטָּא  
בְּלִסְטִייתִיהּ יָדְעוּ! אָמַר לִיה: וּמְאִי אֶהְנֶה לִּי?  
הַתֵּם רַבִּי קְרוּ לִי. הֲכָא רַבִּי קְרוּ לִי. אָמַר לִיה: אֶהְנִיא  
לָךְ דְּאֶקְרִיבִיךָ תַּחַת כְּנָפֵי הַשְּׂכִינָהּ.

חֲלַשׁ דְּעֵתִיהּ דְּרַבִּי יוֹחָנָן, חֲלַשׁ רִישׁ  
לָקִישׁ. אֶתְאִי אַחְתֵּיהּ קָא בְּכִיָּא.  
אָמְרָה לִיה: עֲשֵׂה בְּשָׁבִיל בְּנֵי אָמְרִי  
לֵה: "עֲזֹבָה יִתְמִיךְ אֲנִי אַחֲרֵיהּ."  
עֲשֵׂה בְּשָׁבִיל אֶלְמְנוֹתַי! אָמַר לֵה:  
"וְאֶלְמְנוֹתֶיךָ עָלַי תַּבְטְחוּ."

נַח נִפְשִׂיהּ דְּרַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּן לָקִישׁ.  
וְהוּוּ קָא מְצַטֵּר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן בַּתְרֵיהּ  
טוּבָא. אָמְרוּ רַבְנָן: מֵאֵן לִיזִיל לִיתְבִּיבָה  
לְדַעְתֵּיהּ? נוּזִיל רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן פְּדָת,  
דְּמַחְדְּרִין שְׁמַעְתֵּיהּ.

אוֹל יִתְיָב קַמֵּיהּ. כָּל מִילְתָּא דְּהוּוּ אָמַר  
רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן אָמַר לִיה: תִּנְיָא דְּמַסְיֵנָא לָךְ.  
אָמַר: אֵת כְּבֵר לָקִישָׁא? בַּר לָקִישָׁא.  
כִּי הוּוּ אָמִינָא מִילְתָּא – הוּוּ מִקְשִׁי  
לִי עֲשְׂרִין וָאַרְבַּע קוּשִׁיָּא. וּמִפְּרָקִינָא  
לִיה עֲשְׂרִין וָאַרְבַּע פְּרוּקִי, וּמִמִּילָא  
רוּחָא שְׁמַעְתָּ. וְאֵת אֶמְרַת תִּנְיָא  
דְּמַסְיֵנָא לָךְ. אִטוּ לָא יָדְעָנָא דְּשִׁפּוּר  
קְאָמִינָא?

Rabbi Yoḥanan taught Reish Lakish Bible, and taught him Mishna, and turned him into a great man. Eventually, Reish Lakish became one of the outstanding Torah scholars of his generation. One day the Sages of the study hall were engaging in a dispute concerning the following *baraita*: With regard to the sword, the knife, the dagger [*vehapigyon*],<sup>4</sup> the spear, a hand sickle, and a harvest sickle, from when are they susceptible to ritual impurity?<sup>5</sup> The *baraita* answers: It is from the time of the completion of their manufacture, which is the *halakha* with regard to metal vessels in general.

These Sages inquired: **And when is the completion of their manufacture?** Rabbi Yoḥanan says: It is from when one fires these items in the furnace. Reish Lakish said: It is from when one scours them in water, after they have been fired in the furnace. Rabbi Yoḥanan said to Reish Lakish: **A bandit knows about his banditry,**<sup>6</sup> i.e., you are an expert in weaponry because you were a bandit in your youth. Reish Lakish said to Rabbi Yoḥanan: **What benefit did you provide me by bringing me close to Torah? There, among the bandits, they called me: Leader of the bandits, and here, too, they call me: Leader of the bandits.** Rabbi Yoḥanan said to him: **I provided benefit to you, as I brought you close to God, under the wings of the Divine Presence.**

As a result of the quarrel, Rabbi Yoḥanan was offended, which in turn affected Reish Lakish, who fell ill. Rabbi Yoḥanan's sister, who was Reish Lakish's wife, came crying to Rabbi Yoḥanan, begging that he pray for Reish Lakish's recovery. She said to him: **Do this for the sake of my children**, so that they should have a father. Rabbi Yoḥanan said to her the verse: **"Leave your fatherless children, I will rear them"** (Jeremiah 49:11), i.e., I will take care of them. She said to him: **Do so for the sake of my widowhood. He said to her the rest of the verse: "And let your widows trust in Me."**

Ultimately, Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish, Reish Lakish, died. Rabbi Yoḥanan was sorely pained over losing him. The Rabbis said: **Who will go to calm Rabbi Yoḥanan's mind and comfort him over his loss?** They said: **Let Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat<sup>7</sup> go, as his statements are sharp**, i.e., he is clever and will be able to serve as a substitute for Reish Lakish.

Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat went and sat before Rabbi Yoḥanan. With regard to every matter that Rabbi Yoḥanan would say, Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat would say to him: **There is a ruling which is taught in a *baraita* that supports your opinion.** Rabbi Yoḥanan said to him: **Are you comparable to the son of Lakish?** In my discussions with the son of Lakish, when I would state a matter, he would raise twenty-four difficulties against me in an attempt to disprove my claim, and I would answer him with twenty-four answers,<sup>8</sup> and the *halakha* by itself would become broadened and clarified. **And yet you say to me: There is a ruling which is taught in a *baraita* that supports your opinion. Do I not know that what I say is good?** Being rebutted by Reish Lakish served a purpose; your bringing proof to my statements does not.

**Rabbi Yoḥanan** – רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן: Rabbi Yoḥanan bar Nappaḥa was one of the greatest *amora'im*, whose statements are fundamental components of both the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud. He resided in Tiberias and lived to an advanced age. Rabbi Yoḥanan was orphaned at a young age, and although his family apparently owned considerable property, he spent virtually all of his resources in his devotion to the study of Torah, eventually becoming impoverished. In his youth he had the privilege of studying under Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, the redactor of the Mishna, but most of his Torah study was accomplished under Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi's students: Hizkiyya ben Hiyya, Rabbi Oshaya, Rabbi Ḥanina, and Rabbi Yannai, who lavished praise upon him. In time, he became the head of the yeshiva in Tiberias, at which point his fame and influence increased greatly. For a long time Rabbi Yoḥanan was the leading rabbinic scholar in the Jewish world, not only in Eretz Yisrael but in Babylonia as well, where he was respected by the Babylonian Sages. Many of them emigrated to Eretz Yisrael in order to become his students.

**Reish Lakish** – רִישׁ לָקִישׁ: Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish, often referred to as Reish Lakish, was among the greatest *amora'im* in Eretz Yisrael. He was the friend and brother-in-law of Rabbi Yoḥanan. Reish Lakish led an extraordinary life. He studied Torah at a young age, but subsequently sold himself to a Roman circus as a gladiator, perhaps due to dire financial straits. Many stories in the Talmud attest to his great strength. Some time later, in the wake of an encounter with Rabbi Yoḥanan, as described here, he resumed his Torah study, first as a student of Rabbi Yoḥanan, then as a colleague. He married Rabbi Yoḥanan's sister.

Many halakhic disputes are recorded between Reish Lakish and Rabbi Yoḥanan concerning central issues in the Talmud. His objective was not to disagree with Rabbi Yoḥanan but rather to help him sharpen his opinion through debate. Rabbi Yoḥanan referred to Reish Lakish with great respect, often saying: My peer disagrees with me. Reish Lakish was well known for his strict piety, to the extent that anyone with whom he was seen conversing in public was said to be able to borrow money without guarantors, as Reish Lakish associated only with people beyond reproach. When he died he was survived by his wife and son, who was a child prodigy (see *Taanit* 9a).

**Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat** – רַבִּי אֱלָזָר בֶּן פְּדָת: In the Gemara, citations of Rabbi Elazar without a patronymic refer to Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat, a second-generation *amora* from Eretz Yisrael. He was born in Babylonia, where he was a student of both Rav and Shmuel. In his youth he immigrated to Eretz Yisrael, where he married and became the primary student of Rabbi Yoḥanan. The connection between Rabbi Elazar and Rabbi Yoḥanan was so close that at times the Gemara raises a contradiction between the statement of one and the statement of the other, under the assumption that it was unlikely that they would hold different opinions in matters of *halakha*.

## LANGUAGE

**Dagger** [*pigyon*] – פִּגְיוֹן: From the Latin *pugio*, or *pugionis* in the genitive, meaning dagger.

## NOTES

**Twenty-four difficulties... twenty-four answers** – עֶשְׂרִין תְּשׁוּבָה וְאַרְבָּעָה פְּרוּקֵי: **יָרְבֵּעַ קוֹשְׁיָתָא... עֶשְׂרִין וְאַרְבָּעָה פְּרוּקֵי**: Twenty-four is a generic number in rabbinic literature, which represents a large quantity; it should not be taken literally. Other such numbers are sixty and three hundred (*Torat Ḥayyim*). Some commentaries suggest that this number alludes to the idea that a Sage must be expert in all twenty-four books of the Bible (*Ein Ya'akov*). Others note that the twenty-four difficulties, twenty-four answers, and the final *halakha* mentioned here equal forty-nine, which symbolizes the traditional forty-nine facets of Torah, as alluded to in Proverbs 2:4 (Maharsha).

## HALAKHA

**The sword... from when are they susceptible to ritual impurity** – הַסֵּיף... מֵאִימתי מְקַבְּלִין טוּמְאָה: Metal vessels are susceptible to ritual impurity only when their manufacture is completed. What is considered complete in this regard? A sword is susceptible to ritual impurity only when it is scoured in water, and a knife once it is sharpened. This *halakha* is in accordance with the mishna in *Kelim* (14:4), and not the Gemara here (Rambam *Sefer Tahara, Hilkhot Kelim* 8:2).

## NOTES

**A bandit knows about his banditry** – לְסֵטְאָה בְּלִסְטִיּוּתָהּ יָדַע: Many commentaries ask how Rabbi Yoḥanan could say this to Reish Lakish, as the Torah explicitly prohibits verbal mistreatment of others (see *Leviticus* 25:17). Some explain that a principal teacher is allowed to berate his pupil for a constructive purpose (*Ein Yehosef*; Maharshal). According to this interpretation, Reish Lakish replied that he had studied Torah prior to encountering Rabbi Yoḥanan. Consequently, Rabbi Yoḥanan could not be considered his principal teacher and therefore he had no right to berate him. Others suggest that Rabbi Yoḥanan spoke in a jocular fashion as a way of piquing the attention of the other Sages. He wanted them to listen to the opinion of Reish Lakish, who was an expert in the matter at hand. Reish Lakish misconstrued Rabbi Yoḥanan's intent and was upset by his remark (*Ein Yehosef*).

## POINTS TO PONDER

- What benefits and risks are there to studying with a 'chavruta' – study partner?
- What was the key difference between Reish Lakish and Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat in their approach to how they studied with Rabbi Yochanon?
- Does this passage of Talmud support the idea of independent thinking?

## SUGGESTED ANSWER

One of the most powerful statements ever spoken by a Talmudic sage, is Rabbi Yochanon's explanation of how the twenty-four challenges of Reish Lakish would require him to find twenty-four answers and through this process the Torah was broadened. Independent thinking is essential and asking questions is the key to expanding knowledge. However, there is a correct way and time to question and we have to strike the right balance between challenge and respect.



# INDEPENDENT THINKING IN MEGILLAT RUT (BOOK OF RUTH) JEWISH TEXTS

8 But to her two daughters-in-law she said, “Go on now, turn back, each to your mother’s home, and may the L-rd show you that kindness that you have shown the  
9 dead and me. The L-rd grant that you find a place of rest, each in your husband’s  
10 home.” As she kissed them, they wept aloud and said, “No. We shall return with you  
11 to your people.” Said Naomi, “Turn back, daughters; why would you come with me?  
12 Have I still sons in my womb who could be husbands to you? Turn back, my  
daughters – go; I am too old to be with a man. Even were I to say, ‘There is hope for  
13 me still,’ were I even this night to be married, even if I could bear sons again, are you  
to wait for them as they grow? Would you be chained to them, never to be with  
14 another man? No, daughters, for your presence is most bitter to me now, for the hand  
of the L-rd has beaten me.” Aloud they wept still more, then Orpa kissed her mother-  
15 in-law – but Ruth clung to her. And Naomi said, “Your sister-in-law has turned back  
16 to her people, to her gods. Turn back after your sister-in-law.” But Ruth replied, “Do  
not entreat me to leave you, to turn back, not to walk after you. For wherever you  
walk, I shall walk, and wherever you stay, there I stay. Your people is my people; your  
17 G-d is my G-d. Wherever you die, there I die, and there shall I be buried. So may the  
18 L-rd do to me – and more – for death alone will separate me from you.” Naomi saw  
that Ruth was determined to come with her, and she spoke to her no more.

ח ותאמר נעמי לשתי בלהיה לכנה שבנה אשה לבית אמה יעשה ה  
ט עמכם חסד כאשר עשיתם עם המתים ועמדי: יתן ה' לכם ומצאן מנוחה  
י אשה בית אישה ותשק להן ותשאנה קולן ותבכינה: ותאמרנה לה  
יא כִּי־אתך נשוב לעמך: ותאמר נעמי שבנה בנתי לכנן כי זקנתי  
יב העוד לי בנים במעי והיו לכם לאנשים: שבנה בנתי לכנן כי זקנתי  
יג מהיות לאיש כי אמרתי יש לי תקוה גם הייתי הלילה לאיש וגם ילדתי  
יד בנים: הלהן תשבנה עד אשר יגדלו הלהן תעגנה לבלתי היות לאיש  
יז אל בנתי כִּי־מר לי מאד מכם כִּי־יצאה בי יד־ה': ותשנה קולן ותבכינה  
טו עוד ותשק ערפה לחמותה ורות דבקה בה: ותאמר הנה שבה יבמתך  
טז אל־עמה ואל־אלהיה שובי אחרי: יבמתך: ותאמר רות אל־תפגעו־בי  
לעובדך לשוב מאחריך כי אל־אשר תלכי אלך ובאשר תליני אלין עמך  
יז עמי ואלקיך אלקי: באשר תמותי אמות ושם אקבר בה יעשה ה' לי וכה  
יח יוסיף כי המות יפריד ביני ובינך: ותרא כִּי־מתאמצת היא ללכת אתה  
ותחדל לדבר אליה:

Ruth was a Moabite princess who converted to Judaism and became the great-grandmother of King David. She is a role model of loyalty and independent thinking. The Book of Ruth opens with the sad passing of three men, leaving Naomi without her husband Elimelech and her daughters-in-law Orpah and Ruth, without their husbands Machlon and Chilion. Naomi tells Orpah and Ruth to return to their family homes in Moab, where they can rebuild their lives. Orpah listens but Ruth does not and is determined to stay with her mother-in-law Naomi as they travel to Israel.

## POINTS TO PONDER

- What advantages and disadvantages are there in the different responses of Orpah and Ruth?
- Why did Naomi stop insisting that Ruth should return home?
- What does this section of the Book of Ruth tell us about independent thinking?

## SUGGESTED ANSWER

Naomi, Orpah and Ruth all express independent thinking in different ways. For Naomi it is the independence of fending for herself. For Orpah it is a decision to return home and go on her own journey. While for Ruth it is the determination to stay with her mother-in-law even if that means sacrificing her own interests. Naomi recognised that Ruth made up her mind and stopped trying to persuade her, because she saw that Ruth was not listening. She may have appreciated Ruth's support without wanting to demand it. Often independent thinking means we do the right thing, but sometimes it results in us being stubborn for the sake of it.

# IN TRIBUTE TO YONI JESNER Z"l

Yoni Jesner z"l was killed in a Tel Aviv bus terror attack in 2002. Amongst Yoni's belongings that were found on the bus, were two pages of A4 with his handwriting. These had been started in 1999 and the latest date on them was 13 July 2001. They are of Yoni's thoughts on life; very brief, but incredibly insightful in one so young. He was not writing them to show people, he was not writing them to impress. He was writing them for himself – to live by and to think about. Yoni's writings are available at

[www.yonijesner.org](http://www.yonijesner.org)



## YONI WROTE:

- **“LEARN FROM THOSE AROUND YOU.”**
- **“WHEN TEACHING, NEVER DISREGARD AN ANSWER CURTLY.”**
- **“ALWAYS BE ENTHUSIASTIC.”**



Yoni z"l believed that independent thinking means being open to new ideas and constantly challenging ourselves. Enthusiasm leads to discovery. Find that passion, ask that question and see where it leads you. We hope that you will take the debate, articles and Jewish texts in this Tribe and Bnei Akiva Shavuot booklet, on your journey

**PROUD TO WORK  
IN PARTNERSHIP**



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