

There is a very poignant story in Bava Metzia 84a, in the Babylonian Talmud: two Jews from vastly different backgrounds wind up befriending each other. One, Rabbi Yochanan, a scholar, takes the other, Resh Lakish, a bandit, and teaches him Torah until he becomes a great scholar in his own right. But the story takes a sad turn: one day, as they are arguing animatedly over the status of various knives, Rabbi Yochanan says sarcastically to Resh Lakish, "Well, a bandit would know!" Resh Lakish responds defensively, so Rabbi Yochanan stops speaking to him. Resh Lakish dies, and then Rabbi Yochanan himself is heartbroken over the loss of his study partner.

The Rabbis send Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat to comfort Rabbi Yochanan and be his new study partner. But Rabbi Elazar keeps affirming that Rabbi Yochanan's opinions are right. This enrages Rabbi Yochanan, who responds:

"Are you like ben Lakish? Ben Lakish, when I would state a matter, he would raise twenty-four difficulties against me, and I would answer him with twenty-four answers, and the *halakha* by itself would become broadened and clarified. But you say: 'There is a teaching that supports you.' Don't I know already!?"

I've been thinking about this story particularly because of disagreements within our community about the situation in Israel and Gaza, but also because of how we tend to silo ourselves in a conflict-avoidant culture. Two things from the story deeply touch me. First: the relationship becomes toxic when Rabbi Yochanan makes a derogatory comment about Resh Lakish when they disagree. But the second is that disagreement itself isn't the problem: conflict is the *basis* of Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish's relationship. They generally love arguing. They relish the fact that by challenging each other with their different perspectives, they become smarter, and all of Jewish discourse is enriched.

We may disagree about profoundly important things that are life and death to others and to ourselves. And yet, as much as possible, I'd hope that we can take the model of the Talmud and remember that disagreement does not have to be toxic or harmful. If we are willing to listen to each other and refrain from calling each other names, our conflicts can make us smarter and enrich the world. If we hang in through disagreement, and listen well, we may even wind up with some ideas that bring peace to the world.