

THE KEST EDITION

**The
Encyclopedia
of
Talmudic Disputes
and Perspectives**

**R. YOCHANAN
AND
REISH LAKISH**

NACHMAN COHEN

R. Yochanan and Reish Lakish

Reish Lakish: The Torah was transmitted in its entirety, as it says, "Take **this book** of the law."^{65 66}

Gittin 60a

This dispute is fundamental. It speaks to the manner in which the Torah was transmitted. One must ask and understand what prompted these two rabbis to debate this issue and more importantly why is it that each chose the specific position that he adopted.

Based upon our approach, the position adopted by each *amora* is easily understandable. R. Yochanan, the *Sinai*, maintains that knowledge emanates from Above to Below. Whatever God sees fit to reveal is significant and is to be studied. Knowledge is the quantitative accumulation of facts, which is to be mastered one step at a time. While it is true that there are elements of the Torah that would be reinterpreted once the totality of the Torah was compiled, this is irrelevant. When God sees fit to upgrade man's knowledge He does so. Until that time, fragments of the Torah remain valuable in and of themselves.

Reish Lakish, as an *O'ker Harim*, sees a person's primary mission to be the understanding of the Torah as a complete integrated unit. He demands a qualitative understanding of the text. It is futile to simply analyze each word or sentence in its limited context; a *talmid chakham* must relate every aspect of the text to all others. Each word and sentence of the Torah is interdependent. One cannot understand any one verse or law of the Torah completely unless he knows the whole Torah and how each section relates to every other. For this reason, it would have been "dishonest"⁶⁷ for

⁶⁵ Devarim 31:26.

⁶⁶ אמר רב יוחנן משום רבי בנאה: תורה מגילה מגילה ניתנה, שנאמר: אז אמרת' הגה באתי במגילת ספר כתוב עלי; רבי שמעון בן לקיש אומר: תורה התומה ניתנה, שנאמר: לקוח את ספר התורה הזאת. (גיטין ס.)

⁶⁷ Reish Lakish is the *Amora* who defines truth as follows:

Chapter 8: From Below to Above

the Torah to have been written in sections **and disseminated**, because this would have led to a distorted understanding of the Torah. Thus he maintains the Torah could only be given in its entirety.⁶⁸

All or nothing

Reish Lakish's insistence on knowing the interconnectedness of the entire Torah is emphasized in the following statements:⁶⁹

מהו אמת? אמר ריש לקיש: אל"ף בראשן של אותיות מ"ם באמצע תי"ו בסוף.
(בראשית רבה פא:ב)

What is meant by "אמת"? Reish Lakish answers: Something that is true throughout. The first letter of "אמת" is the first word of the alphabet, its middle letter is the middle letter of the alphabet, and its last letter is the last letter of the alphabet.

Bereishit Rabbah 81:2

Unless one knows all sides of a matter (from *alef* to *taf*), he does not understand it at all and, therefore, has not discovered the truth.

⁶⁸ See Rashi, *Tosefot*, Ra'avad, Rashba and Ritva. We maintain that the 8 parshiyot were transmitted ("נאמר") but not written. Alternatively, if they were written, the written text was not disseminated. The laws then had the status of *Halakhah l'Moshe miSinai* and could not be expounded upon.

⁶⁹ On what did the witnesses testify

אמר רבי יוחנן בשם רבי ינאי ושואל אני בשלום פלוני חזקה על הכל התם, שואל אני בשלום פלוני לא התם אלא על שאילת שלום בלבד. ריש לקיש אמר אפילו אמר שואל אני בשלום פלוני חזקה על כל התם. (ירושלמי גיטין ט:)

R. Yochanan/R. Yanai: If at the end of a *Get* a person writes "and send my regards to..." it is assumed that the signatures on the bottom of the document bear testimony to both statements found in the document. If at the end it is written "send my