Rabbi Yoĥanan – יוחנן: Rabbi Yoĥanan bar Nappaĥa was one of the greatest amora'im, whose statements are fundamental components of both the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud. He existed in Tiberias and lived an advanced age. Rabbi Yoĥanan 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 HaNassi, the redactor of the Mishnah, but most of his Torah study was accomplished under Rabbi Yehuda HaNassi’s students: Hakkuya ben Hiya, Rabbi Oshaya, Rabbi Hanina, 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 Yoĥanan 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 – לָרְדִי: 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 Yoĥanan. 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 Yoĥanan, as described here, he resumed his Torah study, first as a student of Rabbi Yoĥanan, then as a colleague. He married Rabbi Yoĥanan’s sister.

HALAKHA

A bandit knows about his banditry – בַּדָּרְךָ: Many commentators ask how Rabbi Yoĥanan could say this to Reish Lakish, as the Torah explicitly prohibits verbal instruction of others (see Leviticus 19:19). Some explain that a principal teacher is allowed to berate his pupil for a constructive purpose (Son Yehek). According to this interpretation, Reish Lakish replied that he had studied Torah prior to encountering Rabbi Yoĥanan. Consequently, Rabbi Yoĥanan could not be considered his principal teacher and therefore he had no right to berate him. Others suggest that Rabbi Yoĥanan 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 Yoĥanan’s intent and was upset by his remark (Son Yehek).

The Gemara relates: One day, Rabbi Yoĥanan was bathing in the Jordan River. Reish Lakish saw him and jumped into the Jordan, pursuing him. At that time, Reish Lakish was the leader of a band of marauders. Rabbi Yoĥanan said to Reish Lakish: Your strength is fit for Torah study. Reish Lakish said to him: Your beauty is fit for women. Rabbi Yoĥanan said to him: If you return to the pursuit of Torah, I will give you my sister in marriage, who is more beauti-

...
Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat went and sat before Rabbi Yoĥanan. With regard to every matter that Rabbi Yoĥanan 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 Yoĥanan 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, 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.

NOTES
Twenty-four difficulties—twenty-four answers – רָאֵי הָעַדָּרֶכָּה—רָאֵי הָעַדָּרֶכָּה תְּמֻמָּה. 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 (Tosafot). Some commentaries suggest that this number alludes to the idea that a Sage must be expert in all twenty-four books of the Bible (Eim Yailavo). 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 Prov. 24:15 (Mahashia).


Rabbi Yoĥanan and Reish Lakish were a unique pair in the realm of Torah study.

Reish Lakish was usually the one to raise objections and challenges and probe the issues at hand. He would pile up questions, textual or theoretical, on almost everything Rabbi Yoĥanan said. In fact, a significant portion of the sugyot in both the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds is based on the controversies of Rabbi Yoĥanan and Reish Lakish.

Reish Lakish did not intend to dispute the very basis of Rabbi Yoĥanan’s statements, but to more thoroughly investigate and clarify matters, and that was how Rabbi Yoĥanan himself perceived it, too.

Indeed, after Reish Lakish’s death, Rabbi Yoĥanan was deeply grieved by his absence. To comfort him, the sages sent one of their most astute colleagues, Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat, to fill Reish Lakish’s place.

Rabbi Elazar would sit before Rabbi Yoĥanan, and as Rabbi Yoĥanan spoke, he would say "There is a baraita which supports you."

Said Rabbi Yoĥanan, "Are you like the son of Lakish? When I stated a law, the song of Lakish would raise twenty-four objections and I would give twenty-four answers, which would then lead to a fuller understanding of the law. But you say, ‘A baraita has been taught which supports you.’ Don’t I already know that my dicta are right?"