

R. JOHANAN b. NAPPAHA:
THE MAN AND THE SCHOLAR

by

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ABSTRACT

This Thesis deals with the life and work of R. Johanan b. Nappaha who was the leading Palestinian Amora of his time. Chapter I discusses his personal life: including his relationship with his teachers, colleagues, and disciples; the conditions of his birth and death; and an examination of his psychological make-up. Chapter II treats some of his significant contributions to the Halacha such as the problem of the anonymous mishna and the ranking of disputing tannaim. Chapter III touches on some of the highlights of his theology as reflected in his agadic sayings. The thesis utilizes some secondary sources, but the emphasis is on a rigorous examination of the primary sources in the Talmud Babli, the Talmud Yerushalmi, and selected midrashim.

CHAPTER I

LIFE AND BACKGROUND

With the compilation of the Mishnah, under the editorship of Judah Ha-Nasi, the age of the Tannaim came to a close. The approximate date was 220 C.E.¹ The Mishnah brought order out of the chaos of interpretive material and provided a body of approved teaching which later generations could expand and transmit.

When R. Johanan b. Nappaha began his work, flourishing groups of Amoraim (expounders of the Mishnah) had already arisen in both Palestine and Babylonia. These Amoraim undertook the immense task of interpreting the recently codified Mishnah of Judah I. To this field of legalistic research, R. Johanan, the leader of the second generation of Palestinian Amoraim, brought a genius which made him the outstanding halachist and agadist of his era.

Like so many great men before and after him, the adversity which pursued him seemed to be the groundstone upon which his intellect and his perceptions were born. From birth to death, his life was a

1. See Alexander Guttman, Rabbinic Judaism in the Making: A Chapter in the History of the Halakha from Ezra to Judah I, pp. 273 and ff. And Alexander Guttman, "The Patriarch Judah I - His Birth and Death, A Glimpse into the Chronology of the Talmudic Period.", Hebrew Union College Annual, 25:239-263.

combination of physical and mental disasters. His very birth was the occasion for the death of both his mother and father. "R. Johanan's father died when his mother conceived him, and his mother died when she bore him." ¹

He even went so far as to say, "Happy is he who has not seen them (his parents)." ² Whether or not he meant this literally is open to conjecture. But we can assume that it was his way of consoling himself for the pain of his posthumous birth.

Little is known of R. Johanan's lineage. Our sources shed no light on his background or ancestry. He is dubbed with the name bar Nappaha, the smith's son, in a number of places in our Talmud. ³ "Said Resh Lakish: 'The smith's interpretation (R. Isaac's) is better than the son of the smith's (R. Johanan).'" ⁴ Whether his father was named Nappaha or was actually a smith is a matter of conjecture. Rashi suggests that the name may allude to his physical beauty. In

1. B. Kiddushin 31b

2. Ibid.

3. B. Baba Mesia 85b and B. Sanhendrin 96a

4. B. Sanhendrin 96a

that case, Nappaha may be understood, the sense being, inflaming one's desire. ¹

He traces his own descent from the tribe of Joseph. "He said: I am come from the seed of Joseph, against whom the evil eye had no power." ²

The grandfather of R. Johanan undertook the task of educating the orphaned youngster and led him to the study of Torah. When he was a small boy, riding on the shoulders of his grandfather, he overheard words of Torah from the mouth of R. Simeon b. Eleazer. R. Johanan said, "I was riding on the back of my grandfather and I heard the voice of R. Simeon b. Eleazer who was sitting occupied in his study." ³

As a young man he spent all of his time in study. It is recorded that once he was even so absorbed in his work that he ignored the presence of an important person who happened to pass. "R. Johanan was sitting and reading before the house of study of Babylon in Sepphoris, a titled personage passed and he did not rise before him. The servants of this leader wanted to beat him. He said to them, "Leave him be for he is so occupied with the laws of the Creator." ⁴ To

1. B. Sanhendrin 96a

2. B. Berachoth 20a

3. P. Maaseroth 48d

4. P. Berachoth 9a

one who so early showed an aptitude and diligence for study of Torah, R. Johanan's lack of material wealth imposed a burden which he keenly felt. For to him, it meant that he could not devote himself exclusively to study and contemplation. For a time, he subsisted on the proceeds of some arable land, a vineyard and an olive orchard, which he inherited. But finally, he was forced to sell even that to obtain an education. His love of Torah was so great, however, that he felt he had only exchanged that which God had created in six days for something which had required forty days. "It is told that R. Johanan was walking from Tiberias to Sepphoris and his pupil R. Hiyya was with him. R. Johanan noticed a vineyard and remarked to R. Hiyya, do you see this vineyard that was mine, but I sold it (to labor in the Torah). R. Hiyya b. Abba began to weep and said, 'you did not leave anything for your old age'. To which R. Johanan replied, 'is it unimportant in your eyes that I sold something that was created in six days and I acquired something that was given in forty days'. The world and its expanse were created in six days, but the Torah took forty days to be given." ¹

1. Leviticus Rabbah 30:1 and Exodus Rabbah 47:5

But finally, when all his resources were exhausted, he was compelled to enter a business relationship with Ilpha, his friend. The legendary tale of his return to the study of Torah, after his short occupation in the world of affairs is an interesting sidelight into the life and career of this sage. "Ilpha and R. Johanan studied the Torah together. They were in very poor circumstances and even in want of food. So they said, let us arise and go into business, thereby maintaining what is written, 'Indeed there shall be no needy men among thee'. (Deuteronomy 15:4) They went and sat down beneath an unsafe wall and ate their meal. Soon two angels appeared, and R. Johanan heard one of them say to the other, let us throw the wall down upon them and kill them, for they are about to neglect the eternal life (study) and busy themselves with temporal life (business). But the other angel replied: Let them alone for there is one of them for whom time stands in his favor and who will shortly become great. R. Johanan heard this, but Ilpha did not and the former asked, did the master hear anything? Nay, I heard nothing, replied Ilpha. So R. Johanan thought, because I heard it and Ilpha did not, in all probability I am the one whom time will favor, and he said to Ilpha, I have considered it and will return to continue the

study of the Torah, thus fulfilling another passage, For the poor will never cease out of the land. (Deuteronomy 15:11). Thus, R. Johanan returned to his studies and Ilpha returned, R. Johanan had become the chief of the college. The scholars said to Ilpha: if you had stayed here with us (and had continued the study of Torah), we might have made you the chief of the college." ¹

Thus R. Johanan's wisdom and dedication gained for him respect and renown in spite of the difficulties that life had placed before him. Although he was poor in material goods, spiritually, he was richer than any about him. He had been graced with physical and spiritual gifts. The genius of his mind and the beauty of his body gave him the strength to overcome his obstacles. Numerous tales are told of his beautiful body. They tell of a dazzling beauty which radiated from his features and lit up the souls of those who beheld him. "R. Eleazar was ill and R. Johanan went to visit him. He saw that R. Eleazar was lying in a dark room, so he bared his arm and light radiated from it." ²

From our Talmudic sources, it would seem that R. Johanan was somewhat egotistical about his beauty.

1. B. Taanith 21a
2. B. Baba Mesia 84a

R. Johanan said, "I am the only one remaining of Jerusalem's men of outstanding beauty. He who desires to see R. Johanan's beauty, let him take a silver goblet as it emerges from the crucible, fill it with the seed of red pomegranate, encircle its brim with a chaplet of red roses, and set it between the sun and the shade. Its lustrous glow is akin to R. Johanan's beauty." ¹

His vanity is quite evident. R. Johanan himself felt that a woman who was with child, when gazing upon his beauty would bear children of grace and handsome appearance. "R. Johanan used to go and sit at the gates of the Mikveh. 'When the daughters of Israel ascend from the bath', said he, 'let them look upon me (meet me) that they may bear sons as beautiful and learned as I.'" ²

R. Johanan's beauty led to an encounter with Resh Lakish. As a result of this encounter Resh Lakish repented of his evil ways and became great in the study of Torah. "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),

1. B. Baba Mesia 84a

2. Ibid.

Your strength should be for the Torah (devoted to study). '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 weapon, but could not. (Resh Lakish's mere decision to turn to the study of the Torah had so weakened him that he lacked the strength to don his heavy equipment.) Subsequently, (R. Johanan) taught him Bible and Mishnah and made him into a great man." ¹

R. Johanan was known for his strength and his corpulence as well as his beauty. "R. Johanan was once ascending a staircase, R. Ammi, and R. Assi supporting him, when the staircase collapsed under him. He himself climbed up and brought them up with him. Said the Rabbi's to him, 'Since (your strength is) such, why do you require support?' 'Otherwise', he replied, 'what (strength) will I reserve for the time of my old age?" ² His obesity is used humorously in order to describe the manner in which he prayed. "R. Joseph said, 'One who lies on his back should not read the shema', But R. Johanan inclined to one

1. B. Baba Mesia 84a

2. B. Ketuboth 62a

side and read the scripture. It is different with him because he was very corpulent." ¹

The only factor which marred the complete bodily perfection of R. Johanan was his bad teeth from which he suffered greatly. He was afflicted with some sort of disease of the gums. R. Matthia b. Heresh said, "R. Johanan was troubled with scurvy on his gums." ²

Blessed with physical as well as spiritual gifts and disregarding his material handicaps, R. Johanan sought out the foremost teachers of his day to learn as much as he could from their wisdom. Soon R. Johanan's worth was recognized and he was counted among the disciples of R. Judah Ha-Nasi. From an incident revealed in the Tractate Yoma, of an encounter of Rabbi with Johanan's mother, we learn that Rabbi became the patron of R. Johanan even before the latter's birth. "There was a pregnant woman who smelled food (and desired to eat). They came before Rabbi. He said to them, 'Go and whisper to her that it is the Day of Atonement.' They whispered to her and she yielded to the whisper (and would not eat). Rabbi quoted the scriptural verse, 'Before I yet

1. B. Berachoth 13b

2. B. Yoma 84a

formed thee in thy mother's body, I knew thee (Jer. 1:5).¹ R. Johanan was born of this woman (he was the embryo in question)."¹

When R. Johanan grew up, Rabbi numbered him among his disciples and his merit was such that he was allowed to sit before Rabbi. "There were two pupils who sat before Rabbi and one of them was R. Johanan."²

But R. Johanan was very young at the time and as he himself remarks, he was unable to comprehend the depths of Rabbi's erudition. "I remember that I was sitting seventeen rows in back of Rabbi and sparks of fire (discussion of Torah) arose out of the mouth of Rabbi to the mouth of Rab, but I did not understand the significance of their sayings."³

It was probably only the slight impetus which contact with Rabbi gave him that started him on his lifelong path of study.

The Rambam, in his introduction to his Mishnah Torah includes R. Johanan among the pupils of Rabbi but he explains that R. Johanan was the youngest of them all who later became the pupil of Jannai.

1. B. Yoma 82b
2. B. Pesahim 3b
3. B. Hullin 137b

After his short apprenticeship under Judah Ha-Nasi, R. Johanan received instruction from the greatest of the disciples of Rabbi, among whom were R. Hiyya, Abba Arika, and Abba bar Abba.

Also numbered among his worthy instructors were R. Yannai, the pupil of R. Hiyya and Hezekiah the son of Hiyya. Both of these towered above him in knowledge and from them, he gleaned an insight to the code of Judah I.

However, greatest and most noted of all his instructors, under whose tutelage he derived most of his teachings, was R. Hoshaiiah, the pupil of bar Kappara and R. Hiyya, who later founded an academy at Caesarea after his departure from Sepphoris.

Even after R. Johanan had founded his academy in Tiberias and was recognized as one of the greatest of his generation, he continued to visit R. Hoshaiiah to inquire of him the means whereby he might readily resolve his doubts for he esteemed his teacher highly. "R. Ammi said in the name of R. Johanan concerning this problem I went to R. Hoshaiiah in Caesarea and he said to me." ¹

R. Johanan was also taught by R. Hanina bar Hama who prided himself for having such an outstanding

1. P. Halla. 1:4

pupil. "R. Hanina was supported by R. Hiyya in Sepphoris. He saw people running. R. Hanina asked of him, 'Why are the people running?' He answered, 'R. Johanan is discoursing in the house of study of R. Bannina, and all the people are running to hear him.' R. Hanina remarked, 'Blessed be the All Compassionate One who showed me the fruit of my labor while I am still alive.'" ¹

Also among the teachers of R. Johanan may be placed R. Bannina, R. Simeon ben Jehozadak and R. Joshua ben Levi. Their sayings were handed down chiefly by R. Johanan and through him their ideas were preserved. For his teachers, R. Johanan showed great reverence and gratitude. He expressed a great affection for them, and in their presence he walked humbly and modestly. "We are as narrow as the eye of the needle (before our teachers)." ²

After absorbing the teachings of his worthy masters, R. Johanan left Sepphoris and settled in Tiberias where he founded his great academy.

R. Johanan's brilliance spread into the far reaches of Palestine and Babylon, and slowly but surely, all the sages of that generation gathered unto him.

1. P. Horayoth 48b

2. B. Erubin 53a

The disciples of R. Johanan were many for he was considered the greatest of his generation. The leader and foremost scholar in his great academy in Tiberias was his close friend and brother-in-law, R. Simeon ben Lakish. He esteemed him so highly that he placed R. Simeon ben Lakish as an equal in knowledge of the Torah. "What can I do when one who is corresponding to me (of equal standing) differs from me." ¹

R. Johanan's love of Resh Lakish, and his worth to him were so great that he saved Resh Lakish from severe punishment at the hands of the Nasi. "Resh Lakish expounded, a Nasi who transgresses is flagellated by a Beit Din of three. R. Judah II Ha-Nasi heard of it and became angry with him. He sent a band of soldiers to seize him. He fled to a tower. On the morrow, R. Johanan went up to the house of assembly where R. Judah II Ha-Nasi had gone. R. Judah II said to him, 'Why does not my master expound for us a word of the Torah?' R. Johanan made the motion of clapping with one hand. He asked,

1. B. Ketuboth 54b

Do people clap with one hand? R. Johanan replied, 'No, and when Resh Lakish is missing one cannot (Resh Lakish is the other hand).'¹

Resh Lakish, in turn, loved his master well and would not appear before R. Johanan unless he had absorbed his studies completely for R. Johanan was a hard taskmaster. Because of his diligence Resh Lakish was designated as the first leader in the college of R. Johanan. "Resh Lakish used to arrange his studies forty times corresponding to the forty days during which the Torah was given to Israel before he appeared before R. Johanan."²

Second to Resh Lakish and another noteworthy disciple of R. Johanan was R. Eleazer ben Pedath who acted as the substitute of the latter for three and a half years in the leadership of the school in Tiberias. When R. Eleazer ben Pedath came to Palestine, he was the disciple of R. Hanina and later he also served R. Hoshaiah. However, after the death of his teachers, he sat before R. Johanan and was recognized as one of his brightest disciples. "A disciple when leaving his master should not turn his face and go

1. P. Sanhendrin 19d

2. B. Taanith 8a

but should turn his face to the side and leave. So R. Eleazer, when he used to part from R. Johanan. When R. Johanan desired to leave first, he bent himself in his place until R. Johanan was out of his sight. When R. Eleazer wanted to leave first, he walked backwards until he could see him no longer." ¹

R. Johanan esteemed R. Eleazer ben Pedath highly and marvelled at his depth of thought and erudition. "R. Johanan remarked to Resh Lakish, 'I observed that the son of Pedath was sitting and making expositions as Moses in the name of the Almighty.'" ²

As observed above, many of the pupils of R. Hanina and R. Hoshaiiah left after the death of their masters and went to Tiberias to receive instruction from the mouth of R. Johanan. Among them may be listed R. Ammi ben Nathan, R. Asi, R. Hiyya II bar Abba, R. Simeon ben Abba and R. Hiyya bar Joseph. These and many more served before R. Johanan and became his disciples. However, most important was the fact that Rabbi Judah II the Nasi, the son of R. Gamaliel, and grandson of Rabbi, was one of the pupils of R. Johanan. Each found it to his advantage

1. B. Yoma 53a

2. B. Yebamoth 72b

to curry the favor of the other. R. Judah the II, who was not very learned, sought protection for his office from R. Johanan, the leader of the academy at Tiberias. He realized that the strength of the office of Nasi would be enhanced through his connection with the master of the principal academy. He tried in every way to seal his position through a friendship with R. Johanan. Since he understood that R. Johanan was a man of uneven temper, R. Judah II was cautious lest he offend his sponsor, and he also gave R. Johanan excessive honor. In every way, he aided R. Johanan and even supported him by giving him his livelihood from the house of the patriarchate. "What means, 'He would utterly be contemned?' (Cant. 8:7) Ulla said: Not like Simeon the brother of Azariah nor like R. Johanan of the Prince's house, but like Hillel and Shebna (who studied in the direst poverty)." ¹

Simeon studied while supported by his brother and R. Johanan was subsidized by R. Judah the II, the Prince. Each therefore, forfeited some of the merit which accrued from his study. Through the power of his office as Nasi, Judah II would force the people to accept the teachings and decisions of R. Johanan.

1. B. Sotah 21a

All those who refused to obey were punished by the officers of the patriarch.

"R. Johanan went and told about her to R. Judah Nesi'ah (Judah II, the Prince), who sent a constable and forced her to leave her (second) husband."¹

Without doubt, this added to the personal prestige of R. Johanan, for in this way his religious decrees became as law and few would have the courage to doubt his words. He stood out, therefore, as the guiding spiritual and religious light of his time. Both the scholars and the layman showed their love and reverence for him.

To the merit of personal activity in his striving to adorn and exalt the Torah, R. Johanan continued to rise in the world of scholarship. His fame for the methodical analysis of the basic halacha brought him more and more followers to receive instruction and carry down his teachings. As scores of his disciples accepted and taught his decisions, his name spread throughout the scholarly community of his day. R. Johanan did not confine his work only to the actual vicinity of the college, but he visited and lectured at other places until he stamped himself upon the hearts and minds of both the intellectual and social

1. Niddah 52a

world.

"When R. Isaac b. Joseph came he related:
Such a case was once submitted to R. Johanan in
the synagogue of Maon on the Day of Atonement
which fell on a Sabbath." ¹ "R. Jacob, the son
of Idi, said: R. Johanan gave us a decision in
Zaiden." ²

In the Diaspora, where his teachings were
carried by his disciples, his authority was almost
as great as in his native land, and few contemporary
scholars in Babylonia opposed him. "R. Hisda said:
Even if R. Johanan told me that himself I would not
have listened to him." ³ R. Johanan was honored in
the eyes of the Babylonians and all his words were
considered as law there. This is, of course, a
tribute to his scholarly attainments. "At the house
of R. Jehudah, cabbage was prepared and in Rabbah's
house pumpkins were cleaned. Later on Rabbah noticed
this was being done even before the afternoon prayer
so he told them a message was received from R. Johanan
of Palestine and that this was prohibited." ⁴

1. B. Yebamoth 64b
2. B. Ketuboth 7a
3. B. Berachoth 24b
4. B. Shabbath 115a

As for R. Johanan himself, he honored the sages of Babylonia and although with evident exaggeration he often attributed to them the development of the Torah. "R. Johanan said: What (the knowledge of the law) I had believed to be yours (the Palestinian scholars) was in fact theirs (the Babylonians)." ¹ He would become angry at any of his pupils who took lightly the teachings of the Babylonians, and he reprimanded them quite harshly. "R. Hiyya b. Abba and R. Assi were once sitting before R. Johanan, while R. Johanan took a nap. R. Hiyya b. Abba asked R. Assi, why are the disciples of Babylon so well dressed? Because said R. Assi, they are not so well versed in the Torah as are the Palestinian scholars (and are therefore, well dressed to command respect). At that moment, R. Johanan awoke and said to them, children! have I not warned you to keep in mind the passage (Prov. 7:4): 'Say unto wisdom thou art my sister': which means if a thing is as certain to you as the fact that you cannot marry your own sister, then say it: otherwise do not say it." ²

However, R. Johanan recognized no foreign authority except that of Rab (Abba Arika) in Babylonia, his senior colleague under Judah I. With Rab, R. Johanan kept up a correspondence and addressed him

1. B. Baba Kamma 117b

2. B. Shabbath 145b

as "Our master in Babylonia". "When R. Issi bar Hini came up (to the academy in Palestine), R. Johanan asked him, 'Who is the head of the college in Babylonia?' He answered, 'Abba Arika'. R. Johanan said to him, 'You simply call him Abba Arika!' (and you do not refer to him as our master as it is fitting to Rab's dignity)." ¹

However, after the death of Rab, he did not give his successor, Samuel, much respect nor did he heed his authority in legal decisions. R. Johanan condescendingly addressed Samuel as "our colleague in Babylonia". Samuel, in order to win the respect of R. Johanan sent him a complete calendar covering the intercalation for a period of 60 years. He thought that this would make R. Johanan realize his worth. But Samuel was sorely disappointed, for R. Johanan merely admitted that Samuel was a good mathematician. However, when Samuel transmitted to him a mass of questions on the dietary laws, Johanan himself erudite in that field, saw the depth of Samuel's knowledge. Realizing his error he exclaimed, I still have a master in Babylonia. He even resolved to pay Samuel a visit. But in the meantime, he thought that Samuel had passed away. "R. Johanan in writing to Rab addressed him as our Master in Babylon! When Rab died, he wrote to Samuel addressing

1. B. Hullin 137b

him as our colleague in Babylon. He said, he does not know that I am a master. He wrote and sent him the calendar intercalation for sixty years. He said, now I see only that he understands astronomical calculations. He wrote and sent him 13 camel loads of questionable cases of terefah. He said, 'There is a master in Babylon, I shall go and see him! He said to a child tell me thy verse. He said to him, 'Now Samuel was dead! (I Sam. 28:3) Said (R. Johanan), 'This means that Samuel has died.' But it was not the case; Samuel was not dead then, and (this happened) only that R. Johanan should not trouble himself (to go to Babylon to visit Samuel).¹

After the death of Samuel, R. Johanan was without question the greatest leader of his generation in Palestine as well as Babylonia and the Diaspora. "R. Adda b. Ahabah asked him (R. Hinnena b. Idi): Whence have you this? I heard it from three eminent scholars of the scriptures, Rab, Samuel and R. Johanan (Rashi explains that these three scholars are so eminent that they may be relied upon as upon the scriptures).²

Even in Pumbeditha, the sages listened to his religious decrees and accepted his rulings even in

1. B. Hullin 95b

2. Avodah Zarah 40a

place of their own. For R. Johanan was too great of a scholar with whom to contend. "The keen scholars of Pumbeditha said: There is no orlah in the Diaspora. When Rab Judah sent (this ruling) to R. Johanan, he send back! Conceal (the law of) doubtful (orlah), destroy certain (orlah), and proclaim that these fruits must be hidden, and whoever maintains that there is no orlah in the Diaspora, will have no offspring or posterity." ¹

R. Johanan's character was marked by a profound morality as evidenced by his every day affairs. His treatment of the despised pagans and the Samaritans shows a benevolent and an enlightened personalty. R. Johanan treated his servant as an equal. "He drank wine and gave to his servant and proclaimed, did not my maker create him in the womb." ²

Even with all of these virtues, R. Johanan was afflicted in his old age with a kind of arrogance that led to his undoing. R. Johanan was by nature a man of uneven temper, but the passing years brought him a haughtiness which caused him to alienate several of his colleagues. He was able to bear the

1. B. Kiddushin 39a

2. P. Baba Kamma 6c

difficulties which life had thrust upon him, but he could not bear opposition to his views. The following source, although legendary, gives us an insight into this weakness. "R. Johanan gave an exposition. The Holy One, Blessed be He, will in time to come bring precious stones and pearls which are 30 (cubits) by 30 and will cut out from them (openings) 10 (cubits) by 20, and will set them up in the gates of Jerusalem. A certain student sneered at him: (Jewels) of the same size of a dove's eggs are not to be found; are (jewels) of such a size to be found? After a time, his ship sailed out to sea (where) he saw ministering angels engaged in cutting precious stones and pearls which were 30 cubits by 30 and on which were engravings of 10 (cubits) by 20. He said to them: 'For whom are these?' They replied that the Holy One, Blessed be He, would in time to come set them up in the gates of Jerusalem. (When) he came (again) before R. Johanan he said to him: 'Expound, O my master! it is becoming to you to expound; as you said, so have I seen.' He replied unto him: 'Raca, had you not seen would you not have believed? You are sneering at the words of the sages!' He set his eyes on him and (the student) turned into a heap of bones." ¹

1. B. Baba Bathra 75a

R. Eleazar ben Pedath, who many times was extolled by his teacher for his wisdom, in turn felt the onus of shame heaped upon him by the arrogance of R. Johanan. For at times, R. Eleazar taught to his students laws in his own name without attributing them to R. Johanan. "When Resh Lakish was angered at R. Eleazar, he said to him, you have heard something from the smith's son and you did not tell it to us in his name." ¹

R. Johanan, therefore, humiliated his pupil R. Eleazar by disputing the authority of his decision. R. Eleazar, ashamed, feared to face his teacher and hid from his sight. R. Johanan was supported by R. Jacob b. Idi and when R. Eleazar saw them, he hid from before them. "He said: 'Two things this Babylonian did to me. One is that he did not ask for my peace and the other is that he said a law without attributing it to my name.'" ²

R. Kahana, a pupil of Rab, who was sent by his master in Babylon to sit in the circle of R. Johanan, also came to grief because he was unfortunate enough to contend with R. Johanan and to raise his ire although unwittingly. For R. Kahana raised many

1. B. Ketuboth 25b

2. P. Berachoth 4b

questions of an exposition delivered by R. Johanan. R. Johanan thinking that Rab had merely posed the problems as a slight to his erudition became angry with him and shamed him. "R. Johanan saw that R. Kahan's lips were parted and thought that he was laughing at him. He felt aggrieved and in consequence the seal of R. Kahana went to rest." ¹

Even Resh Lakish, the brother-in-law and close friend of R. Johanan about whom R. Johanan glorified himself for bringing him back under the wings of the divine presence, felt the lash of his haughtiness and quick temper. He could not bear any opposition to his views, and whenever Resh Lakish disputed with him, R. Johanan would slyly insult him. He bore a grudge against Resh Lakish which led to the death of his friend and to his own death. One day as they were discussing a point of law, R. Johanan in a fit of anger wounded the pride of Resh Lakish by reminding him of the sins of his youth. Because of his derogatory remarks, Resh Lakish was aggrieved and finally, sick at heart, he died. "Now, one day there was a dispute at the schoolhouse (with respect to the following) a sword, knife, dagger, spear, hand-saw, and a

1. B. Baba Kamma 117a

scythe. At what stage (of their manufacture) can they become unclean? When their manufacture is finished. And when is their manufacture finished? R. Johanan ruled: When they are tempered in a furnace. Resh Lakish maintained: When they have been furbished in water. Said he to him: 'A robber understands his trade:' said he to him, 'And wherewith have you benefitted me! There (as a robber) I was called Master and here I am called Master.' (Hebrew Rabbi is equally applicable to a captain of the gang and a rabbinic master according to Rashi). 'By bringing you under the wings of the shechinah,' he retorted. R. Johanan, therefore, felt himself deeply hurt (by the remark of Resh Lakish that he had not benefitted him) as a result of which Resh Lakish fell ill. His sister (R. Johanan's, the wife of Resh Lakish) came and wept before him: 'Forgive him for the sake of my son,' she pleaded. He replied: 'Leave thy fatherless children, I will preserve them alive.' (Jer. 49:11) 'For the sake of my widowhood send them!' 'And let thy widows trust in me,' (Ibid.) 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 ben Pedath go, whose disquisitions are very subtle.' So he went and sat before R. Johanan but he did not ease his mind.

Thus R. Johanan 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 (R. Johanan) died. ¹

The last years of his life were as unfortunate as his early years. Born without parents, in his later years he was deprived of his best friend and of his ten sons as well. Although his wife bore him ten sons, he did not see any of them grow into manhood. He, however, preserved a bone, (probably a tooth) of the tenth son to show to people who had also suffered a loss. His reasoning was that this would comfort them in their loss. "R. Eleazar was ill and R. Johanan went in to visit him. He noticed that R. Eleazar was weeping. He said to him why do you weep? If it is because of childlessness, this is the bone of my tenth son." ²

However, R. Johanan was blessed with daughters whom he attempted to marry off to noted sages in order to be granted descendants who would be learned in the Torah and a glory to his name. "Ze'iri was evading R. Johanan, who was urging him, 'Marry my

1. B. Baba Mesia 84a

2. B. Berachoth 5b

daughter.' (Zeiri being a Babylonian while R. Johanan was only a Palestinian, he did not wish to marry his daughter, since the former are of purer birth.) One day they were travelling on a road, when they came to a pool of water. Thereupon, he placed R. Johanan on his shoulder and carried him across. Said he to him: 'Our learning is fit but our daughters are not?'¹

Thus did R. Johanan live the long and full life of a great sage. Born without the advantage of parental care, he met the difficulties of life armed with love and a knowledge of Torah. Without the means of a livelihood he dispensed with all worldly cares to assume the meager existence of a student of the law. Striving for wisdom he sought out the greatest scholars of his time to sit at their feet so that he might be nourished by their teachings. Slowly he ascended to scholarly heights, until at the age of 50 he was recognized as head of the college at Tiberias. His teachings pervaded Palestine and the Diaspora, and the sages of his generation flocked to him. Finally, without sons to bear his name and to perpetuate his heritage he died. He was a sick and broken old man who mourned his friend and great colleague

1. B. Kiddushin 71b

R. Simeon ben Lakish whose death R. Johanan had unwittingly caused. He was succeeded by his disciple R. Eleazar b. Pedath as head of the academy at Tiberias. Whatever his weakness may have been R. Johanan was probably the greatest Palestinian Amora.

CHAPTER II
SOME SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTIONS
TO THE HALACHA

R. Johanan attempted to define a basis for legal decisions in the Mishnah. Towards this end he established certain rules to decide which halachot were to be accepted and which rulings of which Tannaim were to be favored. Through his basic set of rules, the Mishnah was transformed from a loosely woven group of halachot which permitted the use of divergent opinions into a code of fixed permanent statutes.

His approach to the intricacies of the Mishnah were simplified by his proximity in time to its compiler and redactor. Thus he was able to comprehend the reasoning of his predecessors in their legalistic dialectics without need for further interpretation or elucidation of their views. We will discover at times in his rules simply a restatement of that which he had been taught by Rabbi and his teachers whose legal decisions he accepted as authoritative.

The first basic rule referred to those Mishnahs which were quoted anonymously.¹ And we find numerous sources which mention that authoritative norm. "R. Johanan said the Halacha is according to the anonymous Mishnah."²

1. See A. Guttman, "The Problem of the Anonymous Mishnah", HUCA, vo. 16, 1941, pp. 137-155 for a fuller discussion of the anonymous Mishnah.
2. B. Shabbat 46a, 81b, 112b,
B. Yebamoth 16a, 42b

How did R. Johanan arrive at this principle? His reasoning is based on the rule of majority opinion as expressed by our sources. "Where an individual opinion differs from the many, the halacha is in accord with the many." ¹

Since an anonymous Mishnah is not ascribed to any particular authority, the anonymous Mishnah may logically be assumed to be the view of the majority. And on the basis of the rule quoted above it is authoritative.

We further follow R. Johanan's reasoning when we consider his two subsidiary rules concerning anonymous Mishnahs. The first of these is a modification, stating that where an anonymous Mishnah follows a dispute, it is to be accepted as authoritative. The second, an apparent contradiction, states that where a dispute follows an anonymous Mishnah, the halacha is not in accord with the anonymous Mishnah. "Could R. Johanan have said, 'The halacha is in agreement with R. Yossi,' seeing that he states elsewhere, 'the halacha is an agreement with the anonymous Mishnah'?" ²

1. B. Berachoth 9a, 37a
B. Yebamoth 40a

2. B. Shabbat, 46a

The other replied, 'The one who pointed out to you this contradiction did not care much for (the quality) of flour. What kind of flour he grinds. He was careless in his arguments. This is an anonymous Mishnah which was followed by a dispute where the halacha does not agree with the anonymous Mishnah; for R. Papa and some say R. Johanan stated: When a disputed ruling is followed by an anonymous one (in the same Tractate or in the same Order), the halacha is in agreement with the anonymous ruling; when, however, an anonymous ruling is followed by a dispute, the halacha is not in agreement with the anonymous ruling."¹

Both these subsidiary rules are based on the principle that the majority prevails. A logical insight into the Mishnah of Rabbi will clarify this contention. The anonymous Mishnah, as observed above, was not stated in the name of any particular authority, so that it may be regarded as the view of the majority. However, this does not hold true completely, for in many cases we find that the anonymous Mishnah was but the minority opinion. For whenever Rabbi concurred with the decision of a Tanna he quoted it anonymously, whether it was the majority or the minority opinion;

1. B. Yebamoth, 42b

so that it might not be said that it was but an individual view which could not be relied upon. Thus, logically, it can be contended that since many minority opinions, as against the majority, were quoted as anonymous when a dispute followed the anonymous Mishnah it showed definitely that the anonymous Mishnah was but the opinion of the minority which did not have the concurrence of the majority and thus the halacha should not be as the anonymous Mishnah.

On the basis of the same reasoning, the proof of the converse, "that when an anonymous Mishnah follows a controversy, the halacha is according to the anonymous Mishnah".¹ is logically comprehensible for when the dispute is resolved by the quotation of an anonymous Mishnah, it seems evident that the dispute was but that of an individual opinion which in turn is settled by the presence of the anonymous Mishnah which is the view of the majority.

R. Johanan's principles about the anonymous Mishnah are extremely significant. Equally significant are his principles concerning the relative merit of one Tanna in relation to another Tanna. In other words, when two tannaim dispute with one another which one is to be accepted as authoritative. "R. Jacob

1. B. Shabbat, 46a

Idi in the name of R. Johanan: 'In all instances where R. Meir and R. Judah differ, the halacha prevails according to R. Judah, wherever R. Judah and R. Jose differ the halacha is according to R. Jose and so much more when R. Meir and R. Jose differ, the halacha prevails according to R. Jose, for, if R. Judah is given preference over R. Meir and R. Jose over R. Judah then certainly R. Jose has preference over R. Meir. Said R. Assi, from this I can infer that where R. Jose and R. Simeon differ the halacha prevails according to R. Jose; for R. Abba said in the name of R. Johanan that wherever R. Simeon and R. Judah differ, the opinion of R. Judah prevails. As a matter of course, if R. Judah is given preference over R. Simeon, R. Jose is certainly a more competent authority than R. Simeon. How is it when R. Meir and R. Simeon differ? This question is not decided." ¹

It can be contended that in the establishment of this rule R. Johanan borrowed from the prejudices and followed closely the opinions of the early sages. For R. Johanan may be truly considered a traditionalist who exalted the early sages over all the scholars of his day. He remarked, "the fingernail of the earlier generations is better than the whole body of the later ones". ²

1. B. Erubin, 46b
2. B. Yoma, 9b

It seems incongruous on the basis of some legal system that one should select the decision of one Tanna in all cases where he disputes with another, and in turn select the latter in preference to a third. The only reason for such a selection can be found in the accepted tradition which is largely prejudicial. Of all of the pupils of R. Akiba, R. Meir, was known for his brilliant thought and for his profundity. Although he excelled his colleagues in his erudition and in his depth of thought he was often not considered authoritative. On the other hand, R. Jose, had his decision adopted in almost every case where he differed with his colleagues. It cannot be supposed that in the cases of the above two Tannaim that there could be some sort of underlying legal system which disqualified per se R. Meir's views and accepted R. Jose's. It seems instead, that R. Johanan without having recourse to a legalistic basis in certain cases of Tannaitic disputes borrowed from the prejudicial considerations of the earlier sages especially those of Judah I.

In the life of R. Meir, there were certain contributing factors which may have disqualified him personally in the eyes of his contemporaries. The Rabbis of his time looked upon his association with heathens as a religious violation. R. Meir is said to have lived on friendly terms with heathen scholars

with whom he had religious controversies.

Also, his association with the apostate Elisha ben Abuyah helped to create a feeling of mistrust among his contemporaries. For of all Elisha's former colleagues and friends, R. Meir alone continued to foster a friendship with him and discuss scientific treatises forgetting to heed the cautions of some pious rabbis who regarded this association with extreme suspicion. R. Meir's love for this apostate was so great that when R. Meir died smoke rose up from Aher's grave. It was as if R. Meir was consorting with the powers that be to spare this great sage who was condemned by the rabbis of that time. ¹

Still another and possibly more important factor was his controversy with R. Simeon ben Gamaliel II. As a result of this controversy R. Meir even had to leave Palestine. R. Simeon wished to institute a change in the ceremonial of the Sanhedrin which would give more honor to himself than to the Av Beth Din ² and the Chakham ³. R. Meir, the Chakham, and R. Nathan,

1. B. Hagiga, 15b

2. The Av Beth Din literally the "father of the law court" was the vice-president of the Sanhedrin (the supreme court of justice) during the second Temple period.

3. The title Chakham was used to designate the third in rank after the Nasi and the Av Beth Din of the Sanhedrin.

the Av Beth Din were offended at this new arrangement and determined to show R. Simeon's unfitness for his high office by confusing him with difficult halachic questions. When R. Simeon learned of this conspiracy he expelled the two from the Sanhedrin, but he could not prevent them from writing difficult questions and distributing them among the members. He was compelled to readmit both R. Nathan and R. Meir to the Academy (Sanhedrin) but he contrived that their names should not be recorded in the halachic traditions. "We shall readmit them but impose upon them this penalty, that no traditional statement shall be reported in their names. (As a result) R. Meir was designated 'others', and R. Nathan 'some say'.¹

Thus we may conjecture that due to the insolence of the patriarch, R. Simeon ben Gamaliel II, who degraded R. Meir before his colleagues, in addition to the fact of R. Meir's association with personalities scorned by his colleagues, R. Meir's legal decisions were placed under suspicion and his authority questioned. A still further insight into this question is shown in the following source which offers an explanation for the disqualification of R. Meir by his contemporaries,

1. B. Horayoth, 13b

although it seemingly has no logical basis. "R. Aha Bar Hanina said: It is known to Him, Who said one word and the world was created, that in the generation of R. Meir there was not one who was his equal; then why do not the halachoth prevail according to his decisions? Because his colleagues could never fathom the depths of his mind. If he decided that a thing which was unclean was clean, he proved it to them by reasoning, and if he decided that a thing which was clean was unclean, he proved it also by reasoning." ¹

The proof that R. Johanan followed the way of the earlier sages, and the fact that he was aware of their view concerning R. Meir, is seen in the following comparison which he makes between R. Hoshaiiah and R. Meir. "R. Johanan said: As was R. Meir in his generation, so was R. Hoshaiiah in his day. As with R. Meir, the colleagues of his day could not fathom the depth of his knowledge, so it was with R. Hoshaiiah. His colleagues could not fathom his ultimate conclusions." ²

The question then arises, if the halachah is not in accord with R. Meir, how can the halacha be in accord with the anonymous Mishnah, since R. Johanan

1. B. Erubin, 13b

2. Ibid., 53a

states that "an anonymous Mishnah rests on R. Meir".¹ However, this contradiction may be resolved since we are aware that R. Meir was but the compiler of the anonymous Mishnahs and that they all do not rest on his own particular view. Many anonymous Mishnahs are even later than R. Meir and many even oppose his system.

R. Jose, in direct comparison to R. Meir, was exalted over his contemporaries and because of his sharpness of mind was considered the authority of his period. Even more convincing is the fact that R. Simeon ben Gamaliel II, though an intimate friend of R. Judah, nevertheless taught the Halacha according to R. Jose, in all places where he disputed with his colleagues, even in preference to R. Judah. "It once happened that R. Simeon ben Gamaliel, R. Judah, and R. Jose were sitting on the eve of the Sabbath and partaking of a meal in the city of Acco and when the Sabbath was about to set in, R. Gamaliel said to R. Jose the Great: 'Would you desire that we clear off the table and act in conformity with the opinion of our colleague R. Judah?' Replied R. Jose: 'Ordinarily you would favor my decrees in preference to those of R. Judah, now you favor his decree in

1. B. Sanhedrin, 86a

preference to mine: "Will he even do violence to the queen before me in the house?" (Esther 7:8) Rejoined R. Simeon ben Gamaliel: 'True! Let us rather not interrupt the meal, for if the disciples should observe this, they might established the ordinance for future generations.' It was said that they did not leave their places until it was decided that the halacha should prevail according to R. Jose's opinion. ¹

The following sources add to those causes which can be cited as the basis for the selection of R. Jose as the authority of this period. According to the Rabbis, R. Jose made no legal decisions without careful consideration of the issues. "In truth this is not so; R. Jose never said this. But (Rabbah) asserted this in the name of R. Jose so that (R. Joseph) would listen to him; for it was known that they applied to R. Jose, his depth is with him. (he has deep reasons for whatever he says and so he was the final authority and the halacha prevailed according to his opinion)" ²

Even Rabbi, the teacher of R. Johanan, states his preference of R. Jose over the other Tannaim, because of R. Jose's capacity for careful and profound

1. B. Pesachim, 100a

2. B. Erubin, 51a

reasoning. "R. Simeon, son of Rabbi, said to him: Seeing that R. Meir and R. Hanina of Ono take a different stand from R. Jose, what was Rabbi's reason for saying that the halacha follows R. Jose? He replied: Say nothing, my son, say nothing; you have never seen R. Jose. Had you seen him (you would know) that he always had good grounds for his views (his depth is with him). For so it has been taught R. Jose always had his reasons." ¹

Since almost all of the early sages agreed unanimously in the belief of R. Jose's superiority over his colleagues and particularly since Rabbi, the teacher of R. Johanan's youth himself believed this; it is not at all surprising that R. Johanan should establish the primacy of R. Jose in the legalistic dialectics of the Talmud as a basic principle of the Talmud.

In the rule which favors R. Judah in preference to R. Simeon, we again find R. Johanan basing his selection on the opinion of those sages who preceeded him. But why is it that when the question is posed "How is it when R. Meir and R. Simeon differ that this question is not answered." ²

1. B. Gittin, 67a

2. B. Erubin, 46b

The reason might be that the Rabbis of the time were loathe to establish the halacha according to R. Simeon and therefore, left it undecided. The reason for this might be that R. Akiba had ranked R. Meir over R. Simeon. "R. Ba said: Formerly everyone would rank his students as did R. Akiba with R. Meir and R. Simeon. He said: R. Meir at first." ¹

Still in the establishment of these rules we do not find complete agreement. In the same source quoting R. Johanan's ranking of one Tanna over another R. Mesharsheya raises the contention that Rab did not act according to such rules. "R. Mesharsheya said: All these rules are of no account. (Decisions should be made according to the dictates of one's own understanding.) What does R. Mesharsheya use as proof? Shall we say as we have learned, R. Simeon remarked: to what can it be likened? It is like three courtyards opening one into the other and also opening into the public domain. If the two (outer) courtyards made erub with that in the middle, it is permitted access to them and they to it; but the two outer courtyards are forbidden access one to the other. R. Hama b. Gorias said in the name of Rab: the halacha is as R. Simeon. And with whom does he dispute? With

1. P. Sanhedrin, 19a

R. Judah! And did we not learn; R. Judah and R. Simeon - the halacha is in accordance with R. Judah. Thus it comes to teach us that we decide according to our understanding (not rules)." ¹

R. Johanan brought forth another principle of the halacha. This particular principle applies specifically to Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel. With regard to Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel, R. Johanan said, "The halacha is in accord with him except in three cases, that of surety, of Sidon, and the latter proof." ² "Rabba b. Bar Hanah stated in the name of R. Johanan that wherever R. Simeon b. Gamaliel records a statement in our Mishnah, the halacha is in accordance with him except in matters of surety, ³ of Sidon, ⁴ and the latter proof ⁵."

We find that R. Johanan also laid down the principle that wherever one finds an individual who is lenient and the many who are stringent, the halacha

1. B. Erubin, 46b
2. B. Sanhedrin, 31a
3. B. Gittin, 38a, B. Bekoroth, 24a, Surety is one person's undertaking to fulfil the obligation of another toward a third person.
4. Ibid, Sidon is a Phoenician port north of Tyre in Lebanon.
5. Ibid, The last piece of evidence in a trial.

is in accord with the stringent viewpoint which is of course, that of the majority. "Rabbah b. Bar Hanah stated in the name of R. Johanan that wherever you find an individual who is lenient, and the majority who are stringent, the halacha is according to the stringent majority except in the following, that even though R. Akiba is lenient and the sages are stringent, the halacha is with R. Akiba." ¹

In conclusion we can observe in these rules, especially in those which gave a preference or a ranking to the decisions of certain Tannaim, the methodical and analytical genius of R. Johanan. He attempted to leave for future generations a key to the interpretation and selection of the halacha in our Mishnah. From the time of R. Johanan on, one can no longer become totally lost in the maze of opinions presented by Rabbi in his redaction of the Mishnah. For R. Johanan carefully formulated his rules to offset any possibility of confusion as to which particular views were acceptable and which particular views were to be disregarded. For these principles, R. Johanan has been held up as the guiding spirit who gave to the world of Jewish scholarship a kind of scientific formula for the better comprehension of the Mishnah and its halacha.

1. B. Erubin, 46a

CHAPTER III

ASPECTS OF HIS THEOLOGY

R. Johanan, the prolific halachist whose legal decisions regulated much of the life of his time, was also a prominent agadist. By means of a vast agadic literature scattered throughout the numerous Talmudic and Midrashic sources, R. Johanan developed his theological system. His fertile mind dealt with subjects like God, man, Torah, Israel, sin, and the world to come. Since the subject of rabbinic theology is such a broad one, we can only touch on a few of its aspects as seen through the eyes of R. Johanan.¹

To R. Johanan God was not to be reached through metaphysical deduction but rather direct experience of His revelations and His workings in this world. For R. Johanan God exists in His heavenly abode surrounded by His ministering angels who sing praises to Him for the miracles He has done. "R. Johanan said: Why is it written: 'And one did not come near unto the other all the night? (Ex. 14:20) The ministering angels wished to sing praises. The Holy One, blessed be He said: The work of my hands is being drowned in the sea, and you wish to sing praises.'" ²

1. See S. Schechter, Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology pp. 1-20.
2. B. Megillah 10b - see Emil Fackenheim, God's Presence in History, p. 36 ff. for contemporary view of this midrash.

This view of God as being surrounded by ministering angels suggests that R. Johanan was familiar with some of the ideas of Merkabah mysticism.¹ He claims that the angels were created by God on the second day of creation. In this aspect he is consistent with the idea of creatio ex nihilo. For if the angels did not exist eternally they could not have aided God in the act of creation. "When were the angels created? R. Johanan said: On the second day the angels were created. As it is written: 'Who forms the waters into the beams of His upper chambers...' (Psalm 104:3) and it is further written: 'Who makes the word His messenger.' "² (Ibid. 104:4) He delved into these esoteric doctrines of the Merkabah and the angelology in spite of the fact that Judah Ha-Nasi, the editor of the Mishnah and a pronounced rationalist, did all he could to exclude references to these doctrines in the Mishnah.³

Although God is on high He still is active in earthly affairs. Upon visiting a house of prayer He rebukes His creatures for not living up to His commands. "R. Johanan said: When the Holy One, Blessed be He, enters a synagogue and does not find

1. R. Johanan said to R. Eleazar: 'Come and I shall instruct you in the secret of the vision of Ezekiel.'
Hagiga 13a.
2. Bereshith Rabbah 1:3.
3. Gershom Scholem, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, pp. 42-43.

there ten, He is immediately filled with wrath; as it is said: 'Wherefore, when I came was there no man? When I called, was there none to answer. (Isaiah 40:2)¹

For R. Johanan God stands as the Shield and the Watchman over the world and its creatures. "R. Johanan said: Samson was typical of the Holy One, blessed be He, as it is written: 'For the Lord God is a sun and a shield.' (Psalm 84:12); just as the Holy One, blessed be He, shields the whole world, so Samson shielded Israel during his generation."²

Although God has a special relationship with His people Israel, R. Johanan never fails to remind us that God is the guardian of all-even Israel's worst enemy.³

The election of Israel is not due to any inherent or racial superiority on its part. Israel was chosen because it agreed to accept the Torah. "The Lord came from Sinai and rose from Seir unto them, He shined forth from Mount Paran' (Deuteronomy 33:2). It is also written, "God cometh from Teman! What did He seek in Seir and what did he seek in Mount Paran?

1. B. Berakoth 6b.

2. B. Sotah 10a

3. "The work of my hands are drowned and you sing praises" B. Megillah 10b op. cit. p. 1.

R. Johanan says: This teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be He, offered the Torah to every nation and every tongue, but none accepted it until He came to Israel, who received it."¹

In other words, God chose Israel, because Israel chose the Torah. The Torah then becomes an exclusive inheritance for Israel. R. Johanan defends Israel's exclusive right to the Torah with a surprising militancy.² "R. Johanan said: A heathen who studies Torah deserves death for it is written: 'Moses commanded us a law for an inheritance.' (Deuteronomy 33:4) It is our inheritance not theirs."³

Israel stands out as a "Chosen People" of God. Israel's mission is to provide the world with the moral limits revealed in the Torah. "R. Johanan said: Just as a thorn bush is made a fence around a garden, so is Israel the fence around the world."⁴

God becomes Israel's protector. He calls Israel by endearing names and gives her the strength to combat her enemies. The nations who are jealous of

1. B. Avodah Zarah 2b.
2. See A. Marmorstein, Studies in Jewish Theology, pp. 221-223.
3. B. Sanhedrin 59a.
4. Shemoth Rabbah 2:5.

Israel's chosenness attempt to pervert her. But Israel is like a wild beast who will, in the end, cause the nations to turn to God and to His service. "R. Johanan stated: The Holy One, blessed be He, said: 'I call Israel dove: as it is written; 'And Ephraim is become like a silly dove.' (Hosea 7:11). To Me they are a dove; but to the nations of the world, they are like beasts as it is written: 'Judah is like a lion's whelp; Naphtali is a hind let loose; Dan shall be a serpent, by the way; Benjamin is a wolf that raveneth.' Genesis 49:9, 17, 21, 27. The tribes all twelve of them are like wild beasts, because the nations fight against Israel and say to them, 'What do you need of the observances of Sabbath and circumcision?' The Holy One, blessed be He, strengthens Israel and makes them like wild beasts before the nations, so that they may subjugate them before the Holy One, blessed be He, and Israel itself. But before the Holy One, blessed be He, they are as a simple dove and obey Him; as it is written: 'And the people believed when they heard that the Lord had remembered the children of Israel, ...' (Exodus 4:31)"¹

The Torah is the supreme connecting link between Israel and God. In the following statement of R. Johanan we find that R. Johanan shared in the view that through the Torah Israel becomes the bride of God.²

1. Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah II:14.

2. See S. Schechter op. cit. pp. 129-130.

" 'I even I am He, that comforts thee. (Isaiah 51:12).'

R. Abba bar Kahana stated in the name of R. Johanan:
A King married a woman and wrote for her a Ketubah
in which he stated all the things he would give her,
so many adornments, so many treasures. Then he left
for a distant land remained there many years. Her
friends counted (the days) and said, 'How long will
you wait? Marry, while you are still young, while
you still have strength.' She would go to her home
take the Ketubah and read in it and then she was
consoled. After a time, the king returned from the
distant land. He said to her, 'My daughter I wonder
how you could have awaited me all these years.' She
said to him, 'My Lord King if not for the Ketubah
my friends would have made you lose me.' So it is
in this world; the nations say to Israel, 'How long
will you wait for your God, and be martyred for his
sake? How much pain, shame, and affliction has He
brought upon you! Come to us and we will make generals,
leaders, and commanders of you.' Israel enters its
houses of study takes the Torah and reads in it; 'And
I will turn myself unto you, and make you fruitful
and multiply you, and I will establish my covenant
with you. (Leviticus 26:9).'

They become consoled.
When the end comes, the Holy One, blessed be He, says
to Israel, 'My sons I wonder how you have waited for
me all these years.' Israel says before God, 'If not

for the scroll of Torah you would have lost us because of the nations.' As it is written: 'This answer will I give to my heart, therefore will I wait. (Lamentations 3:21)' Also David said: 'Unless Thy law had been my delight, I should have perished in mine affliction. (Psalms 119:92)'" ¹

Israel accepts the Torah as her Ketubah. Now she is responsible for keeping up her end of the agreement. She is rewarded if she studies and cleaves to Torah. But if she neglects the Torah she receives a dual punishment, an other-worldly one in Gehinnom and a this-worldly one under Kingly subjugation. R. Simeon B. Abba in the name of R. Johanan said: four things did God show to Abraham: Gehinnom, Kingly subjugation, the giving of the Torah, and the Holy Temple. He said to him: 'At the time your children are occupied with two, they are saved from two; but if they separate from two they are punished with two!"²

Israel, thus, will be more severely chastised for his sins than the other nations. But this is seen as only further proof of God's fatherly love for her. For it is God's belief that Israel can only be brought to the righteousness of Torah through castigation.

1. Pesikta 139b (ed. Buber).
2. Bereshith Rabbah 44:21.

Only through suffering did Israel atone for its sins and receive the greatest gift from Heaven for its penitence. "R. Johanan said: 'Why is Israel like an olive? To inform you that just as an olive does not produce its oil except by means of pounding, so Israel can return to good only through affliction.'" ¹

Righteousness and kindness are the path to the ethical life or the Torah-true life. For God so loves the righteous that He exalts them even above His ministering angels. "R. Johanan said: The righteous are greater than the ministering angels, for it is said, 'He answered and said, Lo I see four men loose, walking in the midst of fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the son of God. (Daniel 3:25).' (Thus the angel is mentioned last as being least esteemed)." ²

R. Johanan divides evil into two categories, sins against God and sins against man. The unpardonable sin against God is the sin of idolatry. The punishment for idolatry is eternal damnation in Gehinnom. ³

1. Menahot 53b.

2. Sanhedrin 93a.

3. See George Foote Moore, Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era, Vol. II, pp. 377-395 for a fuller description of Jewish Eschatology.

R. Johanan said thus: 'There is one thing which causes the evil-doers to burn in Gehinnom. What is it? Idolatry!' It is written: 'It is a doctrine of vanities, it concerns but wood. (Jeremiah 10:8)' And it is written: 'They are vanity. (Ibid. 10:15)' " 1

The greatest sin against man is robbery. "R. Judah in the name of R. Johanan: Robbery: it is like men who have among themselves, idolators, adulterers, and murderers, but robbery is equal to them all." 2

The reward for good and the punishment for evil are meted out both in this world and the world to come. In this life God's goodness surrounds the righteous while poverty and famine haunt the evil.

Death plays a major role in R. Johanan's understanding of Divine Retribution. Death brings peace to the righteous. When the wicked die God at last has to bear their perversities no longer. "R. Johanan said: Why was death decreed against the evil-doers? Because while the evil-doers still live they anger the Holy One, blessed be He; as it is written: 'You have wearied the lord with your words. (Malachi 2:17.'

1. Taanith 5a.

2. Leviticus Rabbah 33:3.

There they cease from troubling the Holy One, blessed be He. Why was death decreed against the righteous? Because while the righteous are living, they battle with their inclinations, but as soon as they are dead they are at rest. As it is written: 'There the exhausted weary are at rest (Job 3:17).' It is enough that we have wearied ourselves." ¹

Although the sinner is punished severely God's attribute of mercy is always present. Through prayer and adherence to the mitzvot the sinner can change his fate, even if the sin is idolatry. "R. Hiyya b. Abba said in the name of R. Johanan" Anyone who answers, 'Amen, May His Name Be Exalted' with all his strength, even though there be in him a bit of idolatry-he is forgiven. It is written: 'When depravity had broken out in Israel then did the people offer themselves willingly: Therefore praise ye the Lord (Judges 5:2).' And it is written: 'That it (the people) had become unruly (Exodus 32:25).' (There it referred to idolatry.)"²

Shabbat observance is seen as a definite sign of repentance. Again one can find salvation even though

1. Bereshith Rabbah 9:5.
2. Shabbat 119b.

he may be steeped in idolatry. "R. Hiyya b. Abba said in the name of R. Johanan: 'All who observe the Sabbath in its fulfilment, although they be idol worshippers, as the generation of Enosh, they are forgiven as it is written: 'Happy is the mortal who does this. (Isaiah 56:2)' 'Every one that keeps the Sabbath by not violating it (Ibid. 56:6).' Do not read; 'By not violating it; but, 'It is forgiven him.' " 1

1. Shabbat 118b.

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