

HAGGAI OLSHANETSKY

*Bar Ilan University*

## Was Reish Lakish a Gladiator?

*It is often mentioned that Reish Lakish (Shim'on ben Lakish), one of the most important rabbis in the land of Israel during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, had been a gladiator before he became a rabbi. They all base their opinion on one legend in the Babylonian Talmud, and especially one sentence in it. The current article wishes to revisit this issue and to prove that there is no concrete basis for this assumption.*

**Keywords:** gladiators, Talmud, Reish Lakish, Resh Lakish, the Roman Games, Shimon ben Lakish, Gittin

The arena and the shows that were performed in it were a vital part in the daily life of a Roman city.<sup>1</sup> This seems to be true in large parts of the Empire.<sup>2</sup> The most famous spectacle was the gladiatorial games. Like the games, Jews were spread all over the Empire,<sup>3</sup> comprising a considerable percentage of the population.<sup>4</sup> And so, the question whether Jews tended to take part in the games, and even fight as gladiators, is an appealing and obvious one.

---

<sup>1</sup> With regards to the history and the spread of the games, and their place in Roman culture: NOSOV (2009: 11–43); WEISS (1995: 2–4).

<sup>2</sup> For a summary of archaeological finds, of arenas and shows in the land of Israel: WEISS (2001: 431–433).

<sup>3</sup> Regarding the spread of Jews, see: KRAEMER (2020); AHUVIA (2020); OLSHANETSKY (2018: 10–11).

<sup>4</sup> On the difficulty in guessing the size of populations during antiquity, and for a few assessments of the number of Jews in the Empire and of their percentage in the general population, see: MCGING (2002); Israel assumes that the number of Jews in the Roman period was between 4.5 and 7 million, a large majority of whom lived under the rule of the Emperors of Rome: ISRAEL (n.d.).

The most famous story that was used as evidence for Jewish gladiators was the story of Reish Lakish (*Shim'on ben Lakish*), one of the most famous Rabbis in the land of Israel in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the current article will examine the story of Reish Lakish and determine whether this figure was indeed a gladiator when he was young, while proving that there is no basis for such an assumption.

There were various scholars and academics whose entire foundation for stating that Reish Lakish had been a gladiator was based on the following sentence from the Talmud:

ר'יש לקיש זבין נפשיה ללודאי.<sup>6</sup>

Reish Lakish sold himself to a *lwd'y*/to the *ludim*

Rocca, Weiss and other scholars agree with each other that the terms *ludi* / *lwd'y* (לודי/לודאי),<sup>7</sup> *ludin* (לודין) and *ludim* (לודים) are all referring to gladiators.<sup>8</sup> This statement is in tandem with the opinions of the scholars preceding them, and they never raised further questions about these terms.<sup>9</sup> However, I think this translation should not be regarded as the only possible one.

Josephus himself noted that at least two nations were called Ludim, and there is a probability that the sentence in the Talmud refers to one of them. The first to be mentioned by Josephus are the Ludieim,<sup>10</sup> a people originating from one of the eight sons of Egypt.<sup>11</sup> Shalit, the translator of Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities* into Hebrew, explained that he used the plural form for the sons/nations, but maybe it should have been more accu-

<sup>5</sup> Even the Encyclopaedia of the Jewish Religion defined him as such: WERBLOWSKY-WIGODER (1986: 360); this stance also prevails in academic publications: WASSERSTEIN (1979–1980); BRETTLER-POLIAKOFF (1990); ROCCA (2006: 294); GROSSMARK (2007: 76–77); BAR-ASHER SIEGAL (2015).

<sup>6</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Gittin*, 47a.

<sup>7</sup> BRETTLER and POLIAKOFF (1990: 95, n. 6) correctly state that in Aramaic, *lwd'y* (לודאי) literally means Lydians. And so, it is very surprising that immediately after, they accept the opinions of JASTROW (1903: 695) and the rest so easily.

<sup>8</sup> WEISS (2001: 442); GROSSMARK (2007: 77).

<sup>9</sup> BRETTLER-POLIAKOFF (1990: 93–98); LIEBERMAN (1942: 142).

<sup>10</sup> *Jos. Ant.* 1, 136–137.

<sup>11</sup> The origin of this legend is in the *Bible: Genesis*, 10, 13; and: *First Chronicles*, 1, 11.

rate to translate them into the singular form.<sup>12</sup> In this case, their name would be *ludi* (לודי). The second nation Josephus mentioned are the Lydians, once known as the Ludim, who were the descendants of Lud,<sup>13</sup> son of Shem. According to Shalit, their identification as Lydians made it possible to differentiate them from the Ludieim, the descendants of Egypt who were dwelling in Africa. In his opinion, it was only natural that Josephus was surveying the different nations outside of Africa and came across the Lydians, who were living on the banks of the River Maeander and were seen as the descendants of Lud. This identification was also convenient for Josephus since the scholars of his time saw those nations as the etymological source for the word for game in Latin – *ludus*. The common belief at the time was that these people were the inventors of games.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, the modern scholars' interpretation is that the term in Reish Lakish's story refers to a gladiator, or to someone affiliated to the games in the arena. This is especially puzzling as in all the dictionaries that they rely on, the term gladiator (which means a performer) has always been listed just after the term referring to the nations mentioned before.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the *Thesaurus Syriacus*, a dictionary which this claim is partially based on, only mentions that the inhabitants of Lydia are called Ludiem (לודים) in Hebrew, while it makes no claim to any word in Hebrew for Gladiators (*ludarius*).<sup>16</sup> It is clear that their similarity in spelling and pronunciation could have easily caused confusion, as most Jews of the period, especially those living in Babylon and the Persian Empire, did not have an excellent command of the Latin language. The two words sound almost identical and so the words would look similar when transcribed into Aramaic. This close resemblance made it only logical that the common belief then attributed the invention of the games to these people.

Furthermore, we must check the sentence and the inherent logic of it in the different translations. It is indeed possible and even sensible if

---

<sup>12</sup> Jos. *Ant.*, trans. AVRAHAM SHALIT, 16, n. 139.

<sup>13</sup> Jos. *Ant.* 1, 145.

<sup>14</sup> Jos. *Ant.* trans. AVRAHAM SHALIT, 17, n. 165.

<sup>15</sup> JASTROW (1903: 695); *Thesaurus Syriacus*, 1095.

<sup>16</sup> *Thesaurus Syriacus*, 1095.

they would have seen it as: “Reish Lakish sold himself to be a gladiator.” But different researchers found themselves grappling with the same problem, as it seems that they thought the translation should be: “Reish Lakish sold himself to a gladiator/gladiators.” This is fundamentally wrong as the owner of a gladiator was known as *lanista*. And so, in order to settle the matter, they have concluded that *lwd’y* (לודאי) is either referring to the *lanista*, or it is a general term for someone who is associated with the games.<sup>17</sup> However, none of the researchers pointed out that while there is a phonetic connection between one of the Latin terms for gladiator (*ludius*) and the *lwd’y* (לודאי) in the Talmud, there is no such connection to the term *lanista*.

As I have stated, the only possibility where we can understand the sentence as relating to gladiators is if the translation is: “Reish Lakish sold himself to be a gladiator.” But this is only one way to translate the sentence. The great problem with this sentence is that the term *lwd’y* (לודאי) is foreign and the number of times that it appears in the Talmud is too small to determine the foreign word it refers to. Even in all the other times Reish Lakish is mentioned, he is described as a man who was only associated with brigands or criminals (ליסטים) and not with *ludim* (לודים).<sup>18</sup>

The scholars understood that this sentence could not be taken separately from the rest of the story and thus it needed to be examined in connection with the claim that Reish Lakish was a gladiator. In the story, Reish Lakish is granted a last wish a day before he is meant to die. Brettler and Poliakoff saw this last wish as a representation of the gladiator’s ceremonial meal before battle, which was called the *cena libera*. They claimed that the difference between the two is minor and insignificant to the issue.<sup>19</sup> But the difference between the two is actually enormous; men who were sent to be executed in the arena were not gladiators and there is no direct link between a ceremonial meal and the last wish of a

---

<sup>17</sup> GROSSMARK (2007: 77, n. 59); LIEBERMAN (1942: 148); WEISS (2001: 442, n. 70); WEISS (1995: 16).

<sup>18</sup> Eichah Rabbah, *Petichta*, 15; Kohelet Rabbah, 7, 26, 1.

<sup>19</sup> BRETTLER–POLIAKOFF (1990: 97); WEISS embraced their opinion full-heartedly: WEISS (1995: 16); WEISS (2001: 442, n. 70).

condemned man.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, only a small percentage of gladiators died in the arena,<sup>21</sup> as they were greatly esteemed performers.<sup>22</sup> Many among them were free men and there were even Emperors who participated as gladiators in the arena.<sup>23</sup> In addition, the gladiators received first-rate medical care. Even the famous physician Galen of Pergamon started his career treating gladiators.<sup>24</sup>

The story of Reish Lakish is located just after a debate in the tractate (*מסכת*) of *Gittin* and might be connected to it. The debate is about redeeming and releasing Jewish captives and slaves whose owners are foreign. Such a debate appears both in the Jerusalem Talmud,<sup>25</sup> and the Babylonian Talmud,<sup>26</sup> and mentions the term *Ludim*. The use of the pluralised term *Ludim* creates the logical problem that was explained above regarding the fact that the person would sell himself not to gladiators but to the *lanistae*. It is clear from the debate that the selling of a

---

<sup>20</sup> As part of the desire to keep the gladiators alive, they received a nutritious vegetarian diet as well as supplements which included calcium to strengthen their bones and prevent them from being broken. This diet allowed the gladiators to keep a healthy fatty layer which assisted in preventing life-threatening injuries and merely allowed for bloody, superficial injuries that made the spectacle more appealing to the audience. Most of what we know about the gladiator's diet and its purposes is based on the research conducted on the anthropological remains from the gladiator's cemetery in Ephesus: KANZ-GROSSCHMIDT (2005); CURRY (2008).

<sup>21</sup> Regarding the fact that most combats ended with one opponent surrendering to the other, and not by the death of one of the participants, see: CARTER (2006: 651–653); HAXBY (2018: 177); regarding the survival of gladiators and their ability to conduct a long career, see: CURRY (2008: 29–30); CARTER (2015: 39–40).

<sup>22</sup> A successful gladiator would have been a real celebrity. They were considered attractive men by the rich women of Rome and some of them were paid considerable sums of money in order to spend time with these ladies. Regarding the story of Empress Faustina, the wife of Marcus Aurelius and the mother of Commodus, where according to one of the stories she had a gladiator as a lover and may have also been pregnant from him: CARTER (2015: 50); Dio, 62, 9, 56.

<sup>23</sup> Regarding the Emperors Nero and Commodus and their participation in the arena: GROSSMARK (2007: 78); OLSHANETSKY (2017: 29–31); regarding the reign of Commodus and his habit to fight as a gladiator: Dio, 73, 17, 1–73, 22, 6; regarding Emperor Caracalla as a gladiator: Dio, 78, 17, 4.

<sup>24</sup> HAXBY (2018: 180); for more information on Galen, see: NUTTON (2020).

<sup>25</sup> Jerusalem Talmud, *Gittin* 25b, 3.

<sup>26</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Gittin* 46b.

Jew or of any person to the Ludim endangers this person's life, and that is why you must redeem him. The danger could be the professional hazard in fighting in the arena as gladiators, but this is not clear or definitive. Generally speaking, we ought to remember that many debates in the Talmud are theological, philosophical and hypothetical and do not necessarily have any connection to the reality of the time. The Rabbis of the Talmud tried to comprehend and understand the most minute details and meanings, and not necessarily out of the assumptions that the questions and possibilities they raised could ever occur in the real world. The religious Jewish texts like the Mishna and the Talmud are totally different from the laws and edicts issued by a state, as the latter are meant to stop or tackle a phenomenon that is already occurring.

Interestingly, the story of Reish Lakish appears only in the Babylonian Talmud after the debate on releasing Jewish slaves, and is not mentioned in the Jerusalem Talmud. This is puzzling because Reish Lakish was a Rabbi in the land of Israel in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, a short time before the Jerusalem Talmud was sealed in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. Yet, the story appears only in the Babylonian Talmud, which was sealed in the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD in a place far from the land of Israel, a long time after Reish Lakish and the gladiatorial games had ceased to exist. The content of the story of Reish Lakish does not assist in strengthening the assumption that the term *lwd'y* is referring to either gladiator or gladiators. From the story, we can only determine that the life of Reish Lakish was in danger and that the Ludim were incompetent. The term Ludim was so ambiguous that it caused a great debate amongst the different Rabbis of the last one and a half millennia. Some of them even suggested that the term means cannibals.<sup>27</sup> The fact that the story appears only in the Babylonian Talmud raises the possibility that the Rabbis in Babylon might have been trying to discredit one of the Rabbis from the land of Israel. Furthermore, the story clearly indicates that even they themselves did not fully understand the term *lwd'y/ludi* and if indeed this term meant gladiator, then the story shows that they were totally ignorant regarding gladiators. Another possibility is that the term Ludim, whether it originated from gladiators or from one of the nations that were

---

<sup>27</sup> BRETTLER-POLIAKOFF (1990: 95).

called Ludim, was used to represent something else in the period of the Babylonian Talmud, which is not clear to us. It is interesting that even in the Babylonian Talmud, in the beginning of tractate *Gittin*, Gamliel referred to a village of Ludim as a geographic-ethnic representation.<sup>28</sup> From all of the above options, maybe the best explanation of the story is that the Ludim were the residents of the said village and the actual brigands that Reish Lakish was associated with in other stories. If they were former comrades in crime and arms, it would also explain why they gave him a last wish in the story. In addition, in other stories told in the Talmud, the term *lwd'y* (לודאי) is used to refer to people who came from Lod or the village of Ludiem.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, we must accept that this was most probably the meaning in the Reish Lakish story as well.

To conclude, there is no foundation for the claim that Reish Lakish was a gladiator, especially for the sole reason that the term Ludim, in all other occasions, was used in the Talmud to describe foreign peoples and not gladiators. In the context of the story, it would be more logical if the term referred to one of the nations mentioned above or the residents of the village of Ludim, and not to gladiators. Moreover, it is impossible to compare Reish Lakish's last wish to the ceremonial meal of the gladiator, the *cena libera*. Gladiators were not considered disposable entertainment. Their lives were precious and valuable, much like modern footballers. There were rules for combat and the referees were there to ensure these rules were upheld. There were people who were sent to the arena to be executed, including in combat, but they were not gladiators. Within the story itself, there is nothing that indicates that Reish Lakish was a gladiator, and there is no reason to attribute such a role to him.

## Sources

- |              |  |
|--------------|--|
| JASTROW 1903 | M. JASTROW (ed.): <i>A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli, and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature</i> . London 1903. |
| SHALIT 2011  | A. SHALIT (trans.): <i>Flavius Josephus. Jewish Antiquities</i> . Jerusalem – Tel Aviv. 2011.  |

---

<sup>28</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Gittin*, 2a, 2; Babylonian Talmud, *Gittin*, 4a, 6; Jerusalem Talmud, *Gittin*, 1a, 1.

<sup>29</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Avodah Zarah*, 36a.

## Bibliography

- AHUVIA 2020 M. AHUVIA: *Jewish Towns and Neighborhoods in Roman Palestine and Persian Babylonia*. In N. Koltum–Fromm – G. Kessler (eds.) *A Companion to Late Ancient Jews and Judaism: 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BCE – 7<sup>th</sup> Century CE*. New York 2020, 33–52.
- BAR-ASHER SIEGAL 2015 M. BAR-ASHER SIEGAL: *Ethics and Identity Formation: Resh Lakish and the Monastic Repentant Robber*. In: K. Berthelot, R. Naiweld, D. Stökl Ben Ezra (eds.): *L'identité à Travers L'éthique: Nouvelles Perspectives sur la Formation des Identités Collectives dans le Monde Greco-Romain*. Turnhout 2015, 53–72.
- BRETTLER–POLIAKOFF 1990 M. Z. BRETTLER – M. POLIAKOFF: *Rabbi Simeon Ben Lakish at the Gladiator's Banquet Rabbinic Observations on the Roman Arena*. *Harvard Theological Review* 83/1 (1990) 93–98.
- CARTER 2006 M. J. CARTER: *Palms for the Gladiators: Martial, Spect. 31 (27 [29])*. *Latomus* 65/3 (2006) 650–658.
- CARTER 2015 M. J. CARTER: *Bloodbath: Artemidorus, Αποτομοσ Combat, and Ps.–Quintilian's "The Gladiator"*. *ZPE* 193 (2015) 39–52.
- CURRY 2008 A. CURRY: *The Gladiator Diet: How to Eat, Exercise, and Die a Violent Death*. *Archaeology* 61/6 (2008) 28–30.
- GROSSMARK 2007 T. GROSSMARK: *God and the Arena in Jewish Rabbinic Literature* [In Hebrew]. *Mo'ed* 17/5 (2007) 67–90.
- HAXBY 2018 M. HAXBY: *The Gladiator Graveyard of Ephesus as Evidence for the Study of Martyrdom*. In: J. R. Harrison – L. L. Welborn (eds.): *The First Urban Churches 3: Ephesus*. Atlanta 2018, 171–191.
- ISRAEL n.d. S. ISRAEL: *Contemporary Jewish Demography*. The Virtual Library of the Centre for Education Technology, n.d. URL: <http://lib.cet.ac.il/pages/item.asp?item=7082>
- KANZ–GROSSCHMIDT 2005 F. KANZ – K. GROSSCHMIDT: *Stand Der Anthropologischen Forschungen Zum Gladiatorenfriedhof in Ephesos*. *Jahreshefte des Österreichischen Archäologischen Institutes in Wien* (2005) 103–123.
- KRAEMER 2020 R. S. KRAEMER: *Where Jews Lived in the West*. In: N. Koltum-Fromm – G. Kessler (ed.): *A Companion to Late Ancient Jews and Judaism: 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BCE – 7<sup>th</sup> Century CE*. New York 2020, 15–32.
- LIEBERMAN 1942 S. LIEBERMAN: *Greek in Jewish Palestine: Studies in the Life and Manners of Jewish Palestine in the II–IV Centuries C. E.* New York 1942.
- MCGING 2002 B. MCGING: *Population and Proselytism: How Many Jews Were There in the Ancient World?* In: J. R. Bartlett (ed.): *Jews in the Hellenistic and Roman Cities*. New York 2002, 88–106.
- NOSOV 2009 K. NOSOV: *Gladiator: Rome's Bloody Spectacle*. Oxford 2009.

- NUTTON 2020 V. NUTTON: *Galen: A Thinking Doctor in Imperial Rome*. London 2020.
- OLSHANETSKY 2017 H. OLSHANETSKY: *The Riddle of the Jewish Gladiator* [In Hebrew]. *Segula* 87 (2017) 27–35.
- OLSHANETSKY 2018 H. OLSHANETSKY: *The Jewish Soldiers of Titus and his Successors, the Roman Emperors* [In Hebrew]. *Hayo Haya* 12 (2018) 7–28.
- ROCCA 2006 S. ROCCA: *A Jewish Gladiator in Pompeii*. *Materia Giudaica* 11/1–2 (2006) 287–301.
- WASSERSTEIN 1979–1980 A. WASSERSTEIN: *A Good Man Fallen Among Robbers* [In Hebrew]. *Tarbiz* 49 (1979–1980) 197–198.
- WEISS 1995 Z. WEISS: *Roman Leisure Culture and Its Influence upon the Jewish Population in the Land of Israel* [In Hebrew]. *Qadmoniot: A Journal for the Antiquities of Eretz-Israel and Bible Lands* 109/1 (1995) 2–19.
- WEISS 2001 Z. WEISS: *The Jews of Ancient Palestine and the Roman Games: Rabbinic Dicta vs. Communal Practice*. *Zion* 66 (2001) 427–450.
- WERBLOWSKY–WIGODER 1986 R. J. Z. WERBLOWSKY – G. WIGODER: *The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion*. New rev. ed. New York 1986.