

THE CAVE 2021

In the Talmud, (Shabbat 33b) there is a great story of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai and the Cave. Written two thousand years ago, right after the “new normal” of the destruction of the Holy Temple took place, it is a tale for our times:

Rabbi Judah, Rabbi Yossi and Rabbi Shimon were sitting together, and their student Judah ben Gerim happened to be sitting with them.

Rabbi Judah began the discussion by observing, "How noble are the works of this Roman nation! They laid out streets, they built bridges, they erected baths."

Rabbi Yossi remained silent.

But Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai spoke up and said: "All that they made, they made to serve themselves: they laid out streets to settle prostitutes there; baths to pamper themselves; bridges to levy tolls."

Judah went off and kept retelling the sage's words, until they were heard by the Roman government, which decreed: "Judah shall be acclaimed as spokesman for the Jews; Shimon, who vilified us, shall be put to death."

Rabbi Shimon and his son hid out in the House of Study. Every day Rabbi Shimon's wife would bring him bread and a jug of water, with which they sustained themselves. But when the pressure of the decree became intense, Rabbi Shimon said to his son: “Women's resolution is frail -- your mother, put to the torture, may reveal the place where we are hiding.”

So they went and hid in a cave. A miracle occurred -- a carob tree and a well were created for them. They removed their garments and sat up to their necks in sand and studied the entire day. They dwelt twelve years in the cave. Then the prophet Elijah came and, standing at the entrance of the cave, announced, “Caesar is dead and his decree annulled”

So they went out. They saw people plowing and sowing. Rabbi Shimon exclaimed, "These men forsake eternal life and engage in life of the world!" Whatever they cast their eyes upon was immediately incinerated. At that, a Divine voice went forth and said: "Have you come

out to destroy My world? Return to your cave!"

So they returned and remained twelve months longer. Finally, they said, "Even punishment of the wicked in hell is no more than twelve months." A Divine voice then came forth and said: "Leave your cave!"

This time, whenever Rabbi Eleazar burned anyone with eyes of fire, Rabbi Shimon would heal them, saying "My son, it is enough for the world if only you and I occupy ourselves with Torah.

On the Sabbath eve, as it was getting dark, they saw an old man running in the twilight with two bunches of myrtles in his hands. When they asked him, "What are these for?" he replied, "They are in honor of the Sabbath."

"But one bundle should be enough!"

"One is for 'Remember the Shabbat' (Exodus 20:8), and the other is for 'Observe the Shabbat' (Deuteronomy 5:12).

Said Rabbi Shimon to his son: "See how precious the commandments are to Israel!" And he was at peace.

Our story begins in a moment of frustration, anger, and justified pain. Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Shimon's teacher, has just been publicly burned in a bonfire by the Roman authorities, and Rabbi Shimon wants nothing of the Romans and their world. The Romans get word of his scoffing and dissention. Rabbi Shimon is sentenced to death.

And so, together with his son Eleazar, they go to hide in a cave. They are sustained by a miraculous well and a single tree, talking TorahHeads who do nothing but study and pray. For two Torah scholars, this is paradise. No one interrupts them. No one disagrees with them. The poor wife is left on her own, and probably takes in laundry. They have no concerns for the well-being of the material world, happy to live a monastic life of water, carobs, and Torah. In some religions, they would be considered enlightened beings or saints, but not in Judaism. A monastic life means that you do not engage in and repair the world, and therefore monasticism is not encouraged.

When they do emerge to engage the world, it does not go well. Whatever they cast their eyes upon goes up in flames!

Enough! The Divine voice decrees. **HAVE YOU COME OUT TO DESTROY MY WORLD?** Return to your cave. The mask order is back. Isolation returns.

After twelve months, God opens the door again. They exit gingerly. Rabbi Shimon's eyes have softened. His son Eleazar's eyes still burn with judgement, but each time they scorch, Rabbi Shimon heals, saying "My son, it is enough for the world if only you and I occupy ourselves with Torah."

On Shabbat, they see a man, perhaps the same singed farmer, carrying not one but two myrtle branches for shabbat. Rabbi Shimon then understands, the Jews will not forsake Torah. Even if some do not study, as they have fields to plow and the challenges of daily business life to meet, they will not forget Shabbat, or God's majesty in this world. And in this "new normal" that will be enough.

Rabbi Shimon and his son spent twelve years in the cave. We have barely survived eighteen months, how many more are left to go? This period of mask wearing and social distancing has been traumatic for everyone, but our reactions to the lockdown have been mixed.

For some, this year in the cave might be regarded as heaven. Every class imaginable is now available on zoom. Working from home made it possible for many to pursue other interests during the time that commuting would have taken from their lives. We have grown used to the convenience of ordering online, and having groceries delivered to our doorstep. For many, there has been extended family time, while others have gone almost two years without seeing children and grandchildren. For those "essential workers" or even just parents having to contend with home schooling and life both in and out of the cave, much of this year has been hell. The inequities of our medical system, especially within communities of color, immediately became visible. The elderly in group homes were especially vulnerable, and people died in isolation, relatives saying their last goodbyes through a window. When a vaccine became widely available in early spring, a year after the pandemic began, the rollout was chaotic at best. All of this took place against a backdrop of a bitter presidential election in an already deeply divided country.

When the doors of the our caves finally creaked opened late last spring, the reaction was mixed. Some dashed out, holding beach parties and graduation celebrations, masks to the winds. Others ventured out cautiously, still scrubbing their hands and wiping down groceries. Most

disturbingly, many of us followed the initial path of Rabbi Shimon and his son. We left the cave with our eyes blazing, ready to scorch those we considered responsible for the pandemic still raging world- wide. The political divide had deepened during our cave isolation, and there was blame all around. To mask or not to mask, to vaccinate or not to vaccinate became a political, rather than a public health or scientific question. Those wrapping themselves in the American flag of individual liberty shot flames of hatred at those who attempted to stop the pandemic through mass vaccination. Those who were vaccinated shot flames of disrespect at those who were not, and those refusing the vaccine were portrayed as backwards and stupid-while sometimes the unvaccinated were merely confused and afraid. Covid Rage is a term of the moment. Will rage, and our reluctance to consider the well-being of others force us back into the cave? With each unchecked variant, the Corona Virus gains strength. Please, **Do Not Destroy My World!**

It took an additional year in the cave for Rabbi Shimon to finally accept that not everyone needed to be a Torah scholar, and that the world was of necessity diverse and complex. The very same Rabbi Shimon is acknowledged a few years later as an author of Pirkei Avot, the text of Jewish ethics written after the loss of the Holy Temple. As stated at the introduction to tractate Avot:

“Simeon the Righteous was one of the last of the Men of the Great Synagogue. He taught: On three things the world stands: on study, (Torah) on worship [*Avodah*], and on the practice of loving kindness [*Gemilut Hasadim*] *Avot 1*

We could all use a larger dose of loving kindness, no matter which side of the political fault line you're on. But as a “hugging rabbi”, probably to a fault, I find myself hesitant to give the hug that offers reassurance and comfort when most needed. How can I reach out to others and keep myself safe? I find myself wearing a mask like a wrist ornament, not sure when and where I will need it. I find eating in restaurants disturbing. As my seven-year-old grandson recently asked, “Does the virus not bother people when they are eating?”

Dr. Arthur Bregman MD, a therapist in Coral Gables Florida, has coined a new name for continued reclusive behavior even after restrictions have been lifted- the Cave Syndrome. I assume Dr. Bregman is Jewish, and

some good rabbi told him the story of Rabbi Shimon and the Cave (See, Jews really do study Torah!). Dr. Bregman characterizes our responses along introvert and extrovert lines, but I think something deeper is at work. I believe that we have been, in the words of Dr. Erin Smokler of the Hartman Institute, suffering from “Proximity to Loss”. Every night, for months before there was a vaccine, the death toll climbed by hundreds and then thousands each day. The images, first of New York and Italy, and then major cities across the world, have become engraved in my mind. Morgue trucks parked outside of the Coliseum in New York. An ice rink used as a morgue in Madrid. Madrid-wait-My son lives there. It could be... What if.. Anxiety, I believe, is the lasting effect of this time of isolation.

In the words of the great Medieval sage “The Maharal,” this is the way of humanity: to be shocked upon hearing that only a small thing kept one alive”.

“Kemat”, in Hebrew means almost, as in “It almost happened, but did not”. Last night we spoke of Abraham and his son Isaac, and how Abraham upon hearing the angel’s voice, withdrew the knife from his son’s neck, and offered the ram instead. We learned of Abraham’s new perspective and Isaac’s last-minute salvation, but what of Sarah? The sources tell us that when Sarah was told that her son Isaac was alive, but only by a hairsbreadth, her soul flew from her body. She dies of the “kemat”, the “almost”.

For over a year now, we have seen Covid numbers rise and fall daily, and I can not help but think - Kemat- Almost. “It could have been my parents”, “it could have been my children” “It could have been ME”. No wonder we are reluctant to leave the cave.

5781 brought home the essential message of our Days of Awe: Human life always hangs by a thin thread. We cannot live buried up to our necks in sand. Eventually we must leave the cave and engage in life fully. But, the rabbis tell us, (Bava Batra 60b) in any moment of celebration we must always leave something undone, to remind us of life’s fragility. That’s why we break a glass at a wedding, right before everyone breaks into a joyous Mazel Tov!!

Mazel Tov. You have survived a year in the cave. May this next year, 5782, bring the blessings of God’s abundance as we throw open our doors and

embrace the beauty that is life.