

Leaving the Cave - a Cautionary Tale

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Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai lived during the 2nd century in Israel, under Roman rule.

Background info:

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai spoke critically of the Roman government, which was reported to the authorities. The Roman emperor sentenced Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son, Rabbi Elazar, to death so they hid in a cave where they studied Torah day and night while being nourished by a carob tree and spring of water which had miraculously appeared in the cave.

After living twelve years alone in the cave, the emperor died and the death sentence was lifted. Elijah the prophet came to the cave and told Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and Rabbi Elazar that it was safe to leave the cave.

Shabbat 33b:7

They emerged from the cave, and **saw people who were plowing and sowing**. Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai **said**: These people **abandon eternal life** of Torah study **and engage in temporal life** for their own sustenance. The Gemara relates that **every place that** Rabbi Shimon and his son Rabbi Elazar **directed their eyes was immediately burned**. **A Divine Voice emerged and said to them**: Did **you emerge** from the cave in order **to destroy My world? Return to your cave**. **They again went** and **sat there for twelve months**. **They said**: **The judgment of the wicked in Gehenna lasts for twelve months**. Surely their sin was atoned in that time. **A Divine Voice emerged and said to them**: **Emerge from your cave**. **They emerged**. **Everywhere that Rabbi Elazar would strike, Rabbi Shimon would heal**. Rabbi Shimon **said to** Rabbi Elazar: **My son, you and I suffice for the entire world**, as the two of us are engaged in the proper study of Torah.

- What happened when Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Elazar looked at the world around them?
- How did God react to Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Elazar's disapproval of the way other people were living their lives?
- For how long did the two men have to go back into the cave?

After leaving the cave for the second time, Rabbi Elazar continued to criticize those around him (burn down) while Rabbi Shimon treated others with respect (healed).

- What do you think Rabbi Shimon learned from his second trip to the cave that Rabbi Elazar did not?

Although the social distancing that the world is experiencing during the coronavirus pandemic is very different from the experience of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and Rabbi Elazar, the story gives us insight into how it feels to move from an isolating experience back into regular life.

¹ Adapted from <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/230496.7?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>

- In the Talmudic story, the transition from being inside the cave to being outside took place in one step. We have experienced a more gradual re-entry. What do you imagine might be the difference to the individual in the two cases? What might be similar? Which do you think you would prefer?

Making the connection

- What has been the most difficult aspect of social distancing?
- Imagine that it is fifty years in the future and you are telling your grandchildren about attending school during a global pandemic. What would you tell them about the experience?
- What have you learned about yourself from the experience of social distancing? What pieces with you take with you, into a future once we have fully left the cave?
- What aspects of ourselves mirror each of the rabbis' reactions? What might we need to pay attention to, as we re-emerge?