

"THE REST OF THE WORLD"

The semi-holiday of Lag Ba-Omer, which we celebrate tomorrow, is traditionally associated with one of the most luminous figures in Jewish history: R. Simeon bar Yoḥai, distinguished disciple of R. Akiva.

The reason for this connection is three-fold: Lag Ba-Omer is the day on which R. Simeon was married. Furthermore, it is the day on which he risked his life, defying the tyrannical edicts of Rome, and accepted semikhah (his ordination). Finally, R. Simeon bar Yoḥai died on Lag Ba-Omer. Another opinion adds a fourth reason for the relationship between this Tanna and the festival of Lag Ba-Omer: This is the day that R. Simeon emerged from his cave.

It is in reference to this fourth reason that I propose to emphasize the marvelous tale told in the Talmud concerning R. Simeon's famous sojourn in the cave. This story, if properly understood, contains within itself a judgment on our lives in 1966 that is so incisive, so powerful, so relevant, that we cannot and dare not ignore it. For the essence of the story of R. Simeon bar Yoḥai is the question of how loyal, observant, and God-fearing Jews ought to orient themselves to the rest of the world.

Let us first analyze our own predicament, and

then see what insights we can derive from the incident of the cave and R. Simeon.

Ever since the Emancipation, religious Jewry has suffered a constant attrition. This deterioration in numbers and intensity has been most noticeable the past ten or twenty years. How ought we act to it? Several tendencies are noticeable.

The first is the way of despair. One contemplates the unfavorable circumstances of our lives, and merely posts an obituary notice. But nothing is done; One goes about the old ways without any change. Thus, this past week the head of one of the most influential agencies in the American Jewish community declared that in his view Judaism will probably not survive in this country. He concluded that we are in deep trouble, and that the crisis is bound to be resolved in the wrong way. Remarkably, this same gentleman and his well-financed organization are not doing much about the situation. They spend their funds in noble causes, from fighting anti-Semitism to civil rights. But most important, this same organization has dedicated its life and its funds to its doctrinaire principle of the separation of Church and State, so that the main brunt of its considerable activity is to see to it, in the name of its own interpretation of the Constitution, that Jewish Day Schools will not receive any kind of assistance from the Federal government --

even when the Federal government wants to give it! Is there not a cause and effect between these two attitudes? Certainly, a Jewish organization which regards a dubious legal interpretation of the Constitution as more important than Jewish education must prepare to acknowledge that it has no faith in the Jewish future.

There is a second tendency. There are some who maintain a stubborn refusal to yield, who have high resolve and persistent determination to continue on the highest level of Judaism, but in ever-shrinking circles. Their's is the gesture of withdrawal, of isolation, of a conscious and conscientious ignoring of the rest of the world, of all other Jews.

As between these two attitudes, I would much rather choose the second. I do not for one moment believe that <sup>the</sup> Jewish people and the Torah will ever disappear. If I were faced with the ~~choice~~ of totally embracing this world or totally rejecting it--I would reject it. This civilization of ours, never let us for one moment forget, is the one which produced an Auschwitz and other such obscene places; it is a civilization which, without any affront to its conscience, produced a Hiroshimah. Our culture is not inherently better, nor more guaranteed of survival, than others before it. Jewishly, I prefer--if I would have to make a choice--to be a withdrawn and hemmed-in Somebody, than a dissipated and diluted Nobody. I prefer being a neurotic Jew to not being a Jew at all!

However, fortunately, we are not called upon to make this tragic choice. We are not restricted to the two options of either "Neturei Karta" or assimilation. And it is this that is at the core of the story of the cave.

The Talmud (Shabbat 33b) tells us: R. Simeon bar Yohai and his son R. Eliezer made slurring remarks about their advanced contemporary Roman civilization. By an indiscretion, they were found out and condemned to death. They fled and eventually hid in a cave, where they were forced to spend some twelve or thirteen years. During this time they lived on nothing more than carobs and water. This long interval was spent by them in growing spiritually, in the study of Torah, and, according to tradition, in achieving tremendous mystic insights which were later incorporated in the book Zohar. After the end of this period they were told that Caesar was dead, and it was safe for them to leave their hiding place. When they emerged, they saw people -- their compatriots-- occupied in the normal business of living: planting, reaping, buying, selling. They were shocked: Is there no one who studies Torah all his days? Kol makom she'notnim enehen miyad nisraf, wherever they looked and whatever they looked at was immediately consumed by fire! At which a bat kol, a Heavenly voice, issued forth and exclaimed: le'hahariv olami yetzatem? Have you left your cave only to destroy My world? Hizru le'maaratkhem, return to your cave! This they did, remaining in the cave another

twelve months. Then another bat kol called forth: Leave your caves. The two scholars left, and, surveying the scene about them, were again deeply distressed. R. Simeon turned to his son and said: dai le'olam an<sup>o</sup> v'ata, apparently you and I are the only ones left. The two of us shall have to continue Judaism by ourselves. But then something remarkable happened: it was behadei pania de'maalei shabbeta, Friday afternoon, just before the beginning of the Sabbath. They saw hahu sabba, an old man who was carrying in his hands trei medanei assa, two bunches of myrtle twigs, ve'rahit bein ha-shemashot, he was rushing just before twilight. "What are you doing this for?" asked the two scholars. He answered: li'khevod shabbat, I am preparing the sweet-smelling myrtle in honor of the Sabbath. "But why two bunches?" father and son asked the old man. He replied: one in honor of the commandment of shamor, to observe the Sabbath day, and the other in honor of zakhor, to remember the Sabbath to keep it holy. Whereupon father turned to son and exclaimed: kamah havivin mitzvot al Yisrael, how this people Israel loves the commandments! As a result, yativ daataihu, their spirits were assuaged, they were pacified and happy. R. Simeon and his son became reconciled to the world.

What does the Talmud mean to tell us in this story? R. Simeon and R. Eliezer are the symbols of the gedolei Yisrael of all generations. They recognized the

rot and the decay of their contemporary civilization and hence preferred to retreat into their own enclave of Torah and piety. They would not pollute the pure spirit of Torah and piety with the corruption of the world. When they did venture forth to meet the rest of the world, they were dismayed. Their own standards had grown during their isolation, while the rest of the Jewish world had remained static. Everywhere they looked, there was fire; the institutions they beheld were "burned"--they reduced the pretense of normal life to ashes. They had finally honed their own spirit to a keen edge, so they could not tolerate people engaged in their regular and profane pursuits of business or professions or universities--anything, indeed, but the Yeshivah, the Beit Ha-Midrash or the Kollel. From that vantage point, the rest of the world was, indeed, nothing!

But -- the bat kol calls out: this can destroy the Jewish world! Back to your cave! With an attitude of this sort, you are not yet fit to live in the community. Neturei Karta may be fit for Meah Shearim, but the rest of the Jewish community cannot live this way. Such attitudes are dangerous and destructive and deleterious, precisely because they are too holy, too remote, too demanding. The Jewish community cannot abide such a perspective--and God wants to save his world even as he wants his Torah to prevail.

But then R. Simeon and R. Eliezer do finally leave their cave and are finally reconciled with the world.

They do learn that Judaism can survive outside the cave, even in the Roman environment. How are they reconciled? How are we -- who consider Torah absolute and modernity relative, who yearn for the beauty of pristine pure Jewish life and fear contamination and pollution in our semi-pagan technological society -- how are we to be reconciled with the rest of the world? What in short, are the sources of our optimism and confidence, of our faith that Judaism will survive without retreat into caves and enclaves?

It is easy enough to point to youth and day schools and Yeshiva University. True, these are the symptoms of a revival. But without encouragement from our elders, our whole enterprise is doubtful. Hence, the Talmud tells us: the giants of Torah who emerged from the cave beheld a most remarkable sight - an old man in the dusk of his life, the Friday night and the twilight of his career, was racing and running. Where to and what for, old man? Preparing for a new Shabbat! Carrying that which will make Torah sweet, which will endear Yiddishkeit to all! When questioned closely as to why he had two myrtle trees, his answer was illuminating: one for zakhor, remembering, and one for shamor, observing. The old man not only performs the commandment to remember, he not only entertains ancient memories, espouses a religion of murky sentiments, recalls faded glories. No! It is true that there are hosts of noble memories worth cherishing, but the old man at the dusk of his life also affirms shamor, "observe the Sabbath!" Guard your heritage for the future, transmit Judaism to a



new generation, prepare for posterity. The old man does not despair, does not give up and return to the womb of yesteryear's memories. He is oriented to a future which he wishes to sweeten and to adorn. His Shabbat is not a relic of the past, but the symbol of the future.

That old man's indomitable optimism is something we dare not fail to learn. If the mature generation of our times is sufficiently motivated to provide for the future, for shamor; if it will do so with sweetness and not with bitterness; if it is confident and working and striving, even if sometimes all this effort seems irrational; if it so loves and adores our precious heritage -- then there is indeed a future for Judaism even outside the cave. If those approaching the dusk of their lives can look beyond the night to a new dawn, then Orthodoxy does not need isolation in order to survive; then Yiddishkeit can and will flourish even outside Meah Shearim and Williamsburg, Bnei Brak and Boro Park. The rest of the world is redeemable!

This afternoon we shall read in our Perek Avot, (Chapter 4) an apparently paradoxical remark. The Rabbis say that yafah shaah ahat shel teshuvah u-maasim tovim, one hour of repentance and good deeds in olam aa-zeh, this world, is more beautiful than all the life of the world-to-come. However, by the same token, one hour of korat ruah, satisfaction, in olam ha-ba, the world-to-come, is worth more than all the life of this world.



Is this a contradiction? No, it is not, not if you read it carefully. What the Rabbis meant to tell us is that this world outside the cave is the arena of progress and action, of repentance, of conviction, of growth, of good deeds, of unceasing effort. The other world, inside the cave, is the arena of satisfaction and warmth, of spiritual rewards, but not much opportunity to convince and to persuade and to build and to transform.

R. Simeon bar Yohai craved his cave; he found korat ruah there. I confess, I would too! The world we live in is false, it is evil and pagan, it is often unspeakably cruel and mean. Every once in a while it is good to retreat into the cave of the Beit Ha-Midrash, the totally Jewish atmosphere. We need occasionally to shut out the harsh and jarring noises of the marketplace and return to the cave. Certainly we will derive from it korat ruah, a great deal of spiritual euphoria and emotional happiness. But, it is in this world, outside the caves and enclaves, in the world of business and the professions, of science and the schools - in this inhospitable and alien and difficult and spiteful atmosphere - it is here where we shall indeed work out our eternal destiny! It is here where Judaism will stand or, Heaven forbid, fall. Assuredly, it is not always a korat ruah, a source of quiet satisfaction. Often it is filled with frustration and disappointment and irritations of all kinds. Yet Judaism cannot grow in caves. It must have a whole world in which to flourish.

Orthodox Judaism in our generation is beginning to emerge from its cave. It must never reject that cave entirely. There will and should always be some who will guard that cave and prefer to live in it. God bless them. But, as R. Simeon and R. Eliezer learned 1800 years ago, that cannot hold true for the entire people of Israel. To insist upon it is to wish, Heaven forbid, destruction upon the Jewish people and particularly the Jewish State. If there are such, then the divine voice commands them: hizru le'ma'aratkhem, return to your caves and do not impose your wish upon the community. As a people we must leave our self-contained caves and risk the great perils - and they are many and tragic - of attempting to live the life of Torah in the wide community, joining the rest of the world in the daily pursuits of all mankind, and endeavoring to be mekadesh shem shamayim ba-rabbim, to sanctify the Name of God in public.

Our God-ordained duty is to bring the trei medanei assa, the two myrtle twigs of Judaism, to the entire world; to offer all Jews and all mankind the sweetness and pleasantness of Torah; to challenge them both to recall the glories that were and prepare for those that yet will be; to inspire teshuvah u-maasim tovim wherever we are; to look confidently towards what destiny is yet to bring us; to acknowledge the mitzvot as our most precious and most beloved possession.

Then indeed we shall be able to live out our lives Jewishly and beautifully and meaningfully, and in dignity and respect and pleasantness.

On this eve of Lag Ba-Omer, the day that R. Simeon bar Yohai left his cave in ancient Judea, these thoughts inspire us to a new faith in an even greater future.