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“EMERGING FROM THE CAVE”

V. The Whole World

In the Ethics of the Fathers (Chap. IV), we read a paradoxical remark. The Rabbis say that one hour of repentance and good deeds in this world is more beautiful than all the life of the world-to-come. However, by the same token, one hour of satisfaction in the world-to-come is worth more than all the life of this world.

Is this a contradiction? No, it is not. 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 gratification there. I confess: I would too! The world we live in is false, it is evil and corrupt, 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 market-place and return to the cave. Certainly we will derive from it a great deal of spiritual satisfaction 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—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 serene world of quiet satisfaction. Often it is filled with frustration and disappointment and irritations of all kinds. But Judaism cannot grow in caves. It must have a whole world in which to flourish.

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