



## “EMERGING FROM THE CAVE”

### II. The Parable

However, fortunately, we are not called upon to make this tragic choice between the ghetto and the wasteland. We are not restricted to the two options of either “Neturei Karta” or assimilation.

This contemporary dilemma is at the core of the famous story of the cave, related in the Talmud (*Shabbat* 33b). R. Simeon bar Yohai and his son R. Eliezer made slurring remarks about their 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? Wherever and whatever they looked at was immediately consumed by fire! At which a *bat kol*, a Heavenly voice, issued forth and exclaimed: “Have you left your cave only to destroy My world? Return to your cave!”

This they did, remaining in the cave another twelve months. Then another *bat kol* called forth: Leave your cave. The two scholars left, and, surveying the scene about them, were again deeply distressed. R. Simeon said to his son: 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 Friday afternoon, just before the beginning of the Sabbath. They saw an old man rushing, and carrying in his hands two bunches of myrtle twigs. “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?” they 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: 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.

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