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"EMERGING FROM THE CAVE"

III. The Reconciliation

What does the Talmud mean to tell us in this parable of the cave? 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 turned their fiery gaze, the institutions they beheld were "burned" — they saw through them, they reduced the pretense of "normal" life to ashes. They had honed their own spirits to a keen edge, so they could not tolerate people engaged in their dull, regular, profane pursuits of business or professions or universities — anything, indeed, but the *Yeshivah*, the *Beit Ha-Midrash*, 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 ready to venture into the wider community. *Neturei Karta* may be fit for *Meah Shearim*, but the rest of the Jewish world cannot live this way. Such attitudes are dangerous, precisely because they are too holy, too remote, too demanding. Jewish society 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 leave their cave again and are finally reconciled with the world. They learn that Judasim 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?

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