

Lessons of the Cave -- Compassion in 2020

By Rabbi Katie Mizrahi

If you were with me on Shavuot, you may remember the story of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, said to be the author of the mystical masterpiece known as the Zohar. I just have to tell it again because the more I think about it, the more I think this story was MADE for this moment...

Tractate Shabbat 33b of the Talmud tells the story of how Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai got into trouble with the Roman authorities of his day, criticizing the accomplishments of Roman civilization as materialistic and hedonistic. An order for his execution sent him into hiding, and he went, with his son Eliezer to live secretly in a cave.

A spring of water and a carob tree appeared in the cave to sustain the two of them for many years. They had a routine. Every day, they would bury themselves up to the neck in sand and study, emerging only to eat and pray three times a day.

They lived like this for 12 long years until one day, Elijah the prophet came by outside the cave saying loudly, "I wonder who will inform Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai that the Caesar is dead and the order of execution has been cancelled?"

Just imagine what it must have been like. To emerge after 12 long years. Imagine the relief, the excitement, maybe the fear...

Shimon bar Yochai and his son Eliezer stepped out of the cave and looked upon their fellow human beings for the first time in over a decade. They saw how immersed everyone was in their physical labor, how little they seemed to care about Torah or prayer.

The pair were filled with outrage and judgment. “How can they forsake the eternal life for these earthly trivialities!?!?” Laser beams of fire shot out of their eyes and began to burn everything they laid their eyes upon.

Then a voice called out from the heavens, “Have you come out of the cave to destroy my world!?! Back! Back into your cave!”

So Shimon Bar Yochai and his son Eliezer had to go back into the cave.

It would seem that even after 12 years of isolation, studying Torah, living off of miraculous food, developing supernatural powers, and writing the Zohar, they still had something important left to learn.

I’ve been thinking a lot about Shimon Bar Yochai in his cave in these past several months. At first I wondered – how did they endure? What was their secret? It couldn’t have just been the carob...

Now, many months into the pandemic, as humanity experiments with re-opening, I've been wondering less about how they endured, and more about how they emerged. And I've been hoping we can avoid getting tossed back into the cave again like they did.

So I'm wondering – do we have anything we need to learn?

I think it's a really juicy and worthwhile question:

What are we learning from this pandemic experience? What have you learned? About yourself? About the world? About what's important? ... We're going to come back to those questions throughout Yom Kippur and beyond...

No one likes to learn the hard way.

But I can't deny that learning the hard way sometimes seems to be the only way we change. Through making really big mistakes. And suffering the consequences of terrible choices.

For Shimon Bar Yochai and his son, the lesson was simple but profound –a lesson many religious traditions suggest we learn from our experiences with suffering. Compassion.

Their story demonstrates – we don't learn this lesson automatically. It's not guaranteed that suffering will teach you compassion. Sometimes suffering just perpetuates itself.

In fact, maybe it was because of the suffering of those 12 years in the cave, that Shimon bar Yochai comes out at first with deadly rage and judgment, burning everything in sight.

You know what they say – hurt people hurt people.

When we are hurting, we sometimes hurt others whether intentionally or unintentionally.

Maybe those laser beams were the concentrated anguish of 12 years in the cave. Unprocessed, raw negativity.

When Shimon bar Yochai and his son land back in the cave, God makes clear that they won't be allowed to leave again till they learn how to transform that suffering into something else.

And so they stayed in that cave another 12 long months. 12 months to reflect on their destructive judgment. 12 months to let go of anger and consider the perspective of their fellow human beings so caught up in the world.

After a year, they came out again. This time, something had changed. When they emerged, Shimon Bar Yochai saw the goodness in the people around him.

The first time, he had asked a question of outrage and judgment. This time, he asked a very different kind of question. “Is there something I can repair?” and proceeded to heal those very places that were burned by the fiery gaze of judgment.

Compassion. He had learned compassion.

And here I’m going to go to the Buddhists, because they really do say it best.

Thich Nhat Hahn teaches that it is possible to activate our own compassion by remembering that the person who has caused harm is also suffering, and that their unhealed suffering gives rise to their harmful behavior.

When we see that a person causes harm out of their own place of woundedness, then we can begin to release our anger, forgive, and make space for the other person to choose a better way forward. In finding compassion for the other, in forgiving, we also alleviate our own suffering.

Right now, all of us are suffering. Most of us more than usual.

Some of us are isolated. Others are stuck sheltering with a full house and unable to be alone. Some of us are working and homeschooling all at once, burning out and

drowning. Others are unsure how to fill the time and stay healthy with so many regular activities on hold. Some of us have experienced major life losses, losing loved ones, losing jobs, homes, health.

Meanwhile, all of us are living through a time when the very air is unsafe to breathe, when Democracy hangs on by a thread, when the living systems of the Earth as we know it are close to collapse.

It's a lot. For any of us.

In our best moments the darkness brings out our strength and gives us the courage to shine.

But other times, it just takes a toll.

Right now, many months into this worldwide emergency, I'd venture to say very few of us are at our best.

We are all struggling. Messing up. Making mistakes. Losing our patience.

Saying hurtful things, resorting to old bad habits. Tormenting ourselves and one another with wild anxiety.

I know that for me, I've lost my temper more than usual since the lock down began. I've taken out my own frustrations on the people I love most. I've allowed my sense of overwhelm to paralyze me or become an excuse.

And I've seen us struggle within our own beloved community as we are forced to interact through screens. Our physical separation makes it so much easier to jump to judgment, so much harder to come from a place of compassion.

Without the social and emotional feedback of in-person connections, there is SO MUCH miscommunication, SO MUCH misunderstanding.

I've seen more than one email that would have rivaled Shimon bar Yochai's laser beam eyes for its destructive power.

So what can we do? What did Shimon bar Yochai do?

Learn compassion. Practice compassion.

Now more than ever, we need to give the benefit of the doubt, to be more forgiving of others, and ourselves. To judge less harshly. To be kind.

The first 12 years in the cave, Shimon bar Yochai may have written the Zohar and gained superhuman powers, but it was the last 12 months that taught him to become a true blessing to the world.

And the transformation wasn't just about how he felt. It was about action.

Like so much of Jewish tradition, it's all about the deed.

Compassion is not just a warm fuzzy feeling of empathy, it's a practice of words and deeds that move that feeling out of your heart and into the world. "What can I fix?" he asked, and got to work.

I'm happy to say, I see this a lot in our community. Or Shalomers reaching out to one another with phone calls and challah. Or Shalomers sustaining the community with generous financial support. Or Shalomers organizing to support housing for the homeless, gathering bond money to release immigrants from ICE prisons.

This is what compassion looks like in action.

We don't know when it will be safe for us to come out of the covid cave. But in the not too distant future, that day will come. It will! And when it comes, I pray we emerge as Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai did the second time – with compassion for those around us and a willingness to put ourselves to work in a world that will need it.