

There's a tweet that went viral in Jewish social media circles last week. It said:



**Dan Mahboubian Rosen** @thedanrosen · Sep 26

People wonder why Jews are neurotic. It's because the chill ones didn't make it. Every Jew you meet is the descendent of a Jew 200 years ago who was like "yo, the vibes are off. Let's get on a boat."

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Baked into the humor of this tweet is a harsh reality: we have survived as a people through a combination of luck and hypervigilance. And it has come at a cost. Plenty of folks have commented on the tweet, noting that there is a theory within the field of epigenetics that stress responses to trauma can be inherited by generations who didn't directly experience the trauma, and that this stress could even be passed down to *their* children, another generation removed from the traumatic event. You might have heard that when a pregnant person experiences a traumatic event, the fetus is flooded with stress hormones. What you might not know is that studies have suggested that if the fetus has developed ovaries, those stress hormones can even make their way into the germ cells that will become eggs.<sup>2</sup> Three generations immediately impacted by a single traumatic event.

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<sup>1</sup> The tweet can be found [here](#), and you can hear Donald Glover express a similar sentiment in [an old standup routine](#).

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6127768/>

There's a story from the Talmud that has held a lot of resonance for me these past couple of years, as we've lived through our own earth-shattering traumatic event. It's a story about Shimon Bar Yochai, a student of Rabbi Akiva's living in Roman-occupied Jerusalem in the decades following the destruction of the Second Temple – and, more pointedly, after the public execution of Rabbi Akiva, which we will read about in tomorrow's Martyrology service.

In conversation with some of his fellow scholars, Bar Yochai responds to Rabbi Yehuda's praise of the Romans for their establishment of community marketplaces, bridges and bathhouses, retorting that, in truth, the Romans did all of these things for their own worldly desires and comforts. Yehuda ben Gerim (yes, two of the major actors in this story are named Yehuda) is present for this conversation and repeats the comments publicly, leading Bar Yochai's criticism to reach the ears of the Roman authorities, who sentence him to death. He and his son flee to a cave, in which they hide, sustained only by a nearby carob tree and a spring of water.

In order to preserve their clothes to remain presentable during their daily prayers, Shimon and his son, Elazar, spend most of their time in the cave naked. So that they won't freeze, they bury their bodies in sand up to their necks and spend their days discussing Torah. They keep this routine up for twelve years,

until they learn that the emperor has died, and the death sentence no longer has force of law.

However, after a dozen years in an ascetic intellectual lifestyle, practically disembodied heads, Shimon and Elazar emerge from the cave a bit aloof to the rhythms of regular life. Upon encountering people engaging in agriculture, Shimon derides their pursuit of worldly matters over the eternal life provided by the study of torah.

It's here that the story takes an unexpected turn: *kol makom shenotnin eyneihen miyad nisraf*. "Every place that the two of them turned their eyes was burned." Like, they shot lasers from their eyes? Has over a decade of living in their minds, focusing on holy matters elevated them to the level of superheroes?

That may well be the case, but their actions aren't framed as heroic. In fact, a voice emerges from the Heavens, asking if they've come out of the cave in order to destroy the world, and sends them back into the cave for another year. When they reemerge after another year, Elazar's eyes still burn, but Shimon Bar Yochai has grown enough to be capable of healing all that Elazar damages.

As you might imagine, I'm not the only rabbi who's found this story particularly relevant in the past couple of years. There were plenty of sermons delivered on Lag Ba'Omer (Shimon Bar

Yochai's *yahrzeit*) and Yom Kippur in 2021 revolving around the question of how we could begin to “emerge from the cave” of isolation. About the way that we are presented with a choice: to follow the example of Elazar, whose anger and self-righteousness was a destructive force, or Shimon, who found humility and was able to consider the perspective of others.

But none of the sermons I've encountered that look at this story acknowledge that all of what I've just related to you is only half of the story.<sup>3</sup> And the rest of the story is also significant.

When they return to their community, Shimon's son-in-law Pinchas ben Ya'ir rushes to see him. He brings Bar Yochai to the bathhouse<sup>4</sup> and in an extremely respectful and generous act of *chesed*, begins tending to his flesh. Remember, Shimon has spent twelve years burying himself in sand. Pinchas is so distraught to see his father-in-law so physically broken that he begins to cry. The text literally tells us that the tears fell from his eyes and caused Shimon pain. Pinchas says, *Oy li* - “woe is me - that I should see you in such a state.” Shimon replies that it is a *good* thing for Pinchas to see him like this, since he has attained a higher level of Torah as a result of his time in the cave. While Shimon offers Pinchas a silver lining, essentially

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<sup>3</sup> Literally. The narrative [begins](#) midway down Shabbat 33b and continues onto [Shabbat 34a](#). It's eight total paragraphs, and the story above fills the first four.

<sup>4</sup> Ironic, given that Shimon's death sentence was, in part, for saying that the Romans had built bathhouses not for the communal good, but in order to pamper themselves.

responding “no pain, no gain,” the truth remains that he has been permanently changed by his experience, and though he has grown as a result, the scars will be with him for life.

Shimon resolves to go out and, in gratitude for his miraculous survival, bring some good into the world.<sup>5</sup> He uses his advanced knowledge of Torah to solve a problem that has been vexing the people. When a fellow rabbi makes a snarky comment about it, Shimon looks at the man witheringly, and he dies. Shimon then goes to the marketplace, where he sees Yehuda ben Gerim, the man who repeated his comments about the Romans, the transmitter of his private comments into the public sphere. He says, “This one still has a place in this world?” And then, the text tells us, *Natan bo einav, v’asehu gal shel atzmot*. Literally, “he gave him the eyes, and made him into a pile of bones.”

That’s the real conclusion of this narrative!

Though Shimon Bar Yochai is trying his best to do good and bring healing to the world, he is limited by the extent of his

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<sup>5</sup> He cites a verse from Genesis about Jacob arriving safely (literally “whole”) to the city of Shechem after his wrestling match and encounter with Esau, taking the lesson that when one has been the recipient of a miracle, one is obligated to do an act of kindness for the community. The rabbis jump in here, interrupting the story of Bar Yochai to ponder what acts of kindness Jacob did for the city of Shechem (rabbis and their tangents, am I right?).

Rav said, he established a currency for them.

Shmuel said, he established marketplaces for them.

Yochanan said, he established bathhouses for them.

That’s right – in the middle of this story about Shimon Bar Yochai’s growth, two of the rabbis refute his critique of the Roman government by assigning to Jacob the same acts of generosity that Shimon dismissed.

trauma. When his attempts to bring goodness into the world are met with derision, or when he encounters the person who was, in some way, responsible for all that he has endured, his temper gets the better of him, and his emotional reaction leads to the death of two men who, in spite of ways that they may have done Bar Yochai wrong, were probably not deserving of instant death.

Shimon had such high hopes of being a healer – but without directly acknowledging his own pain, he couldn't do the work of healing himself.

Tomorrow morning, we'll hear Cantor Kate sing stirring words from our liturgy: *Hin'ni he'oni mima'as, nir'ash v'nifchad mipachad yoshev t'hilot Yisrael*. Here I am, meager of deeds! In turmoil, and afflicted with such fear to stand before the one enthroned on Israel's songs and praise. This prayer, which dates back to the Middle Ages, is traditionally offered by the *hazzan*, or cantor, the liturgical service leader, naming their inherent shortcomings, their humanity. It is a prayer of humility.

Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg writes:

“This personal prayer recited by the prayer leader is a public declaration of unworthiness. The leader represents all the people seeking divine compassion and forgiveness. Who could possibly be worthy of such a task if its success depends on the moral purity

of the leader? Indeed, true prayer always acknowledges our spiritual poverty. The leader asserts a readiness for true prayer – free of self-centered thoughts, free of manipulative strategies, no longer tallying merits. One is ready to seek God’s love, compassion and forgiveness when one is ready to admit how small our efforts are in relation to divine grace.”<sup>6</sup>

*Hin’ni, he’oni, mima’as* - here I stand before you tonight not only as “The Rabbi,” but also as a human being, a member of this community. The circumstances leading to me appearing before you this evening as a disembodied head on a screen belie my humanity, vulnerability, and shortcomings. I am a human being, living in the same moment as you, vulnerable to the same factors as you.

Like many of you, these past few years have been immensely difficult for me. As a spiritual leader, I’ve struggled with imposter syndrome – the sense that I’m not strong enough or capable enough to guide the community through such challenging times. I’ve felt an obligation to broadcast strength and stability, all the while facing the same uncertainty and change as all of you. Trying to live up to those expectations and be the spiritual leader I felt you all deserved took so much out of me. I burned out early on, and then kept going.

COVID wasn’t the only major upheaval going on in my life. As most of you know, in December 2019, three months before the first shutdown, my wife and I welcomed twins, our second and

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<sup>6</sup> KH p. 852

third children. The adjustment was huge, and determining what choices to make for our unvaccinated children's health and safety took a lot of energy out of us. Through our vigilance, we were able to keep COVID out of our home for two-and-a-half years, only letting down our guard within the past few months, once the twins were finally able to be vaccinated.

But there was another underlying issue – one that I didn't know about for most of the time it was happening.

It was just after the High Holy Days in 2019, my second here at CKS. A year into the job, I was getting into the flow of things, but I was struggling a bit. I had yet to begin receiving treatment for the ADHD that I've lived with for decades. I had two more kids on the way – immanently. I spoke to my doctor about my increased anxiety. He suggested medication, though he encouraged me to pursue it through a psychiatrist. I balked, for more complex reasons than I have time to go into at the moment, so he prescribed me what he could comfortably give me – something without severe side effects.

It would be another two years before I learned that the medication I had been prescribed was not only not helping with my anxiety, but, due to drug interactions and genetic factors impacting its effectiveness, had probably been the cause of my increased anxiety. But recognizing the medication as the source of increased anxiety is hard to do when other factors



include welcoming twins, living through a global pandemic, and being a parent and spiritual leader during a global pandemic.

Thankfully, with the help of a skilled psychiatrist, over the past year I have been weaned off of the medication that was injuring me, and am now receiving appropriate treatment.

I also have to name the tremendous loss that we experienced just 16 months ago, with the tragic death of one of our most beloved communal leaders, Susan Ellis Waskow. I must admit to you that in that first year, I was so focused on trying to care for the community that I still haven't given myself the space I needed to grieve. It's only recently that I've been able to acknowledge that my unprocessed grief has hindered my ability to provide the community the support that you need. I deeply regret this.

I don't share any of this with you in search of sympathy, as a point of comparison, as an excuse, or as a form of public penance for the ways that I've fallen short of my goals or of your expectations of me, though I am well aware that I have. My story is only one story, and I know that all of you have your own stories. But as your spiritual leader, I have the authority, and also the responsibility, to model what it looks like to get the healing you may need. And part of that is sharing my story.

The Belgian psychologist Esther Perel, in conversation last year with Brene Brown, spoke about her experience growing up as a child of survivors of the *Shoah*, in community with other children of survivors.

...We would say, “Do you have parents who talk or do you have parents who never talk? Do your parents tell, and do your parents not tell? And what do they tell?” ... And I happened to have had very, very good storytellers. My parents would talk and my friends would sit around the table and just listen because they had understood. Naturally they had a way of talking that basically put their denial system in place so that when it became too horrible, they just didn’t go there. So they told stories that were accessible to us....we were not running away because it was so unbearable. So the storytelling is part of what created continuity. What creates continuity in all communities that are uprooted, dismantled, broken...

None of them ever went to therapy, this was not their culture. ... They come together to be in a circle with people who...went through something quite similar, so they don’t have to talk about it, and instead they can play cards, they can eat cake...very clever. It creates enough of the familiarity and the continuity without having to dig into the muck. Now what happens to the second generation? ...you don’t know, so you fill in the gaps...It’s like Swiss cheese and then you start to invent all kinds of things, you start to imagine things. And you have no idea if it’s true or not, and often you imagine worse than what may be.<sup>7</sup>

We have to name our pain in order to grow past it. If we keep our grief hidden away, we never give ourselves the opportunity to truly move forward.

Though we may imagine that we’re protecting our children, what we’re really doing when we shield them from bad things

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<sup>7</sup> From Brene Brown’s podcast, *Unlocking Us*. September 22, 2021. Podcast and transcript [here](#).

in the world is failing to equip them with the appropriate tools to handle challenges and process their own hurts and traumas. The danger doesn't disappear just because we've put up blinders to it.

We *have* to talk about the seismic shift that we've been through, because the trauma will still be passed down in an indirect way – without offering our children any context or tools for understanding those emotions.

Coming back to that tweet – yes, we are descended from survivors and people who never let down their guards. But there's another way of framing this truth: We're descendants of leaders and risk-takers. We're descendants of storytellers. Telling our stories, including the harsh edges and less savory parts, has given us the strength to persevere. The ability to grow. The power to know how far we've come.

We've lived through so much these past few years, and we've done our best to “get back to normal” as quickly as possible, but there's a cost. Coming out of our caves is not a one time action, and we aren't being forced to decide between staying in the cave and going back to exactly how we were before as if everything hasn't been irrevocably changed while we've been away.

Ignoring all that we've learned would be a waste of an opportunity to imagine a "new normal" - one that acknowledges where we've been, but also allows us to imagine where we could go if we weren't stuck on the idea of a "return to normalcy." You know what's normal? Change. It's a constant, and though the process has sped up tremendously over these past years, the way to cope with all of this change isn't trying to go back to an imagined before time.

We need to be able to look backwards honestly and name all that we've been through in order to have the strength and the vision to carry things forward – to move away from destructive thoughts and behaviors, and actively work towards repair and healing. I'll have more to say about that tomorrow.

*Erev tov.*