

RH erev Sermon

Are we there yet?

There's a wonderful and lesser-known story from the Talmud of a rabbi named Shimon bar Yochai who was sitting one day (sometime around 160 CE) with two buddies, Yehuda and Yosei, in the gate of the city. Rabbi Yehuda looked around and proclaimed, "How pleasant are the actions of this nation, the Romans, as they established marketplaces, built bridges, and established bathhouses." In response, Rabbi Yosei was silent. But Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai responded and said: "Everything that they established, they established only for their own purposes. They established marketplaces, to place prostitutes in them; bathhouses, to spoil themselves; and bridges, to collect taxes from all who pass over them." Well, the Emperor heard about the conversation and said, "Yehuda, who elevated the Roman regime, shall be elevated and appointed as head of the Sages. Yosei, who remained silent, shall be exiled from his home. And Shimon, who denounced the government, shall be put to death."

This was enough reason for Shimon to take his son, Eleazar, and flee from the wrath of Caesar.<sup>1</sup> He and his son hid in a cave for 12 years. One day, a voice called from the mouth of the cave announcing that the Emperor was dead, the edict was annulled, and it was safe to come out. When the two emerged, they were shocked by what they saw. Everyone was living their lives – like normal! Shimon was furious. He and his son had lost 12 years of their lives in zealous defense of God's Torah and nobody else seemed to be taking the matter seriously. The fervor of his piety caused the bible's version of Jewish space lasers to come shooting out of his eyes and everything he gazed upon was torched to a crisp.

Suddenly God spoke up and sent Bar Yochai and his son back into the cave lest they destroy the world. Just when the two thought they were finally out of the wilderness, it turned out to be nothing more than an oasis. Imagine running a half-marathon – that's all I'll ever be able to do, myself, is imagine it. You think you've just about made it and then as you rally to make it to mile 13.1, you find out that it isn't a half-marathon at all, but a full 26.2 miles. Just as

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<sup>1</sup> b. Shabbat 33b

the first time around, they could not know that the second stay would be so much shorter...where would they find the strength to get through that again?

Do you hear a little familiarity: they needed to go into isolation, they came out for a little while, found they were cranky and challenged by everything and everyone they saw and were sent back into isolation again. So too, with us: A voice spoke, perhaps that of the CDC, telling us to run for our caves if we wanted to save our lives and we stayed hidden for as long as necessary. The voice then told us that it was safe to finally come out of hiding and we came out. Slowly, tentatively, and with marvel at how interesting it felt to do things which were once so normal! And then, looking around with frustration and anger at the behavior of others, we were told to go back into our caves. We asked ourselves where we were going to find the reserves to get through it again? This is how I have felt lately. We find we are still very much in it and, I'm afraid that we've got some distance yet to go.

When the voice called and told him to go back outside again, this time after only 12 months, nothing had changed outside. His son, Rabbi Eleazar was still enraged by what he saw – everywhere he looked was destroyed. But his father, Rabbi Shimon had changed. The boy still raged but wherever he gazed, his father looked too and healed the damage. Why does one come out still angry and not the other? What happened to Rabbi Shimon during that second isolation? We don't have input from the texts so I am left to wonder aloud: how was Shimon's second stay in the cave different than the first? I have four thoughts.

First, Shimon was older and wiser than his son. He'd lived through more ups and downs in life, studied more Torah and could see the picture more clearly. Wisdom is hard-earned and not necessarily associated with age but perhaps it was the factor that made the difference between the two men.

Or, second, perhaps it had to do with the impact on Eleazar's shorter life. We don't know how old he was when they entered the cave but 12 years of *his* life was certainly a much bigger proportion than the 12 years were to Shimon's longer life. My 7-year-old daughter hardly remembers what life was like before wearing a mask all the time. It might be unfair to expect Eleazar to simply transcend his own worldview if he had less memory of the world before the cave.

Third, it could be that Shimon was the father here. And every parent I know entered the pandemic asking themselves, “how can I get my children through this with the least damage to their psychology?” Perhaps Shimon remembered that his first and most important purpose was to get a hold of himself and to model for his son what right behavior looked like. As a parent, he couldn’t afford to sink into the morass of his own self-involvement.

And, fourth, we know he was pious. He came out of the cave the first time thinking he’d be a hero and, when the God he so dearly defended, angrily sent him back into the cave, perhaps it was Shimon alone who asked the question, “Why is God upset with me? What have I done wrong and what can I do to change it?”

We won’t know which of these is true or perhaps some other explanation altogether, but we know that, unlike his son – Shimon was able to use his time in the cave, that second time, to change...to make meaning ...to grow. Viktor Frankl taught us the importance of making meaning through the most difficult of his experience in Auschwitz. He wrote: “One could make a victory of those experiences, turning life into an inner triumph, or one could ignore the challenge and simply vegetate.”<sup>2</sup> Perhaps this was the secret to Shimon’s growth. The second time around he made meaning out of the suffering.

It must have been hard being back in the cave. Just because we have a healthy goal doesn’t mean it is easy! In fact, that second twelve months must have been harder than the first twelve years. But, Judaism has plenty of wisdom out there teaching us what to do with adversity. The Torah tells that the Israelites wandered for 40 years when they could have hightailed in across the desert in about a month.<sup>3</sup> In fact they did get to the border of the promised land quite quickly so why couldn’t they go on in? Because they had work to do before they were ready to emerge from the wilderness into the promised land.

Brené Brown suggests the same wisdom in modern terms: The wilderness [of one’s life] is an untamed, unpredictable place of solitude and searching. It is a place as dangerous as it is

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<sup>2</sup> Frankl, Viktor E. *Man's Search for Meaning* (p. 72). Beacon Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>3</sup> Based on [Ex. 13:18](#).

brehtaking, a place as sought after as it is feared. But it turns out to be the place of true belonging, and it's the bravest and most sacred place you will ever stand."<sup>4</sup>

I don't know about you but my temper has been flaring a lot lately and I'm pretty sure that if my Jewish eyes could shoot space lasers, I'd have fired off a couple shots here and there. And just like Shimon and his son, we have been sent backwards again after we thought the ordeal was over.

George Carlin coined the term "*vuja de*" to mean the opposite of the French idiom "*déjà vu*." *Déjà vu* literally means "already seen," and that odd feeling of familiarity, as if the moment being experienced has already happened to you before but you cannot place it. It was the feeling of being sent back into our caves – we'd been there and we'd done that!

Vuja de describes experiencing something familiar as if it were strange and unknown.
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*Vuja de*, in contrast, describes experiencing something familiar as if it were strange and unknown. Something we do all the time but suddenly feels weird.<sup>5</sup> You know what I mean, you've had lots of these experiences lately: We hadn't shopped at Trader Joe's as normal in a long time. We hadn't gone to work as normal in a long time. We hadn't traveled or visited our parents or met, for the first time, our new grandchildren...in a long time. And then, suddenly, after we'd been so disciplined and cautious, we were told it was OK to begin to engage in those activities and to see those people. It was like *Vuja De*! We have been experiencing familiar activities as if they were strange and unknown.

We marveled at how good a cup of coffee tasted when enjoyed in the company of a live human being. We remarked on how different it was to sit amongst co-workers and to attend moments of simchah. We told ourselves that we were going to have to make sure to hold on to the marvel of it all for as long as possible and, I don't know about you but, notwithstanding occasional moments of *vuja de* now, I slid back into my routines almost immediately.

And, as we saw the resurgence of Covid-19's Delta variant, many were asking themselves how we were going to do it again. Would we have the strength, patience and

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<sup>4</sup> <https://brenebrown.com/blog/2017/07/18/my-new-book-braving-the-wilderness/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.newharbinger.com/blog/self-help/vuja-de-finding-meaning-after-trauma/>

resilience to make it through another difficult spell when we still haven't recovered emotionally from the first?

“Do not pray for an easy life. Instead, pray to become stronger people to endure a life with difficulty.” ~JFK

It is scary to find oneself in the wilderness. Dorothy just wanted to get back to Kansas repeating “there’s no place like home!” Now, that’s one thing I haven’t tried, clicking my heals together three times and repeating, “There’s no time like the old days!” If you think of it, Dorothy’s little mantra was a prayer asking, “take me back to the life I knew before.” JFK advised us: “Do not pray for an easy life... pray, instead, to become stronger people to endure a life with difficulty.”

Like the Israelites of the Torah, Rabbi Shimon and his son thought that the wilderness was their time in the cave. They thought coming out was the promised land but learned quickly that they were still in the wilderness of their own mind. They were not ready to live as fully engaged members of society and so they were made to reenter the cave. When they were invited to emerge a second time, only Shimon had come out of the wilderness. His son, Rabbi Eleazar still hadn’t learned what it meant to live a divine life full of gratitude, meaning and purpose. We’ve been in the wilderness before as a people, too, and we’ve learned lessons along the way.

Each year, we mourn the tragedies and destructions of our people’s history on the 9<sup>th</sup> day of the month of Av. The devastation to our rich Jewish culture at the hands of the Romans in the year 70CE cannot be overstated. Practically speaking, nothing familiar was left as we were disbursed and disoriented by unexpected changes in the reality. Rabbi Edwin Friedman taught that the only way to make a change in a system is to disrupt it and, out of the initial chaos, growth can occur. We’ve been jostled out of our stasis. We’ve had our systems upended and it has been painful – both as individuals and as a larger community within communities. But Ed Feinstein pointed out that Judaism did not die with those horrendous

moments of destruction on the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av, because on the 10<sup>th</sup> of Av, the very next day, the Jewish People began to rebuild, to reimagine, to recommit, to renew Jewish life.<sup>6</sup>

There are so many who made the difficult decision and sacrifice to remain home this evening and the rest of us made the difficult decision to come knowing we'd have to wear masks and would not be hugging friends. Many are not going to restaurants and stores; skipping theatre and yearned for travel once more. Because we're back in the cave. Can we make the best of it? Can we learn lessons about who we wish to be when we come out into the light of day once more blinking away the *vuja de*? Can we acknowledge that our personal wilderness is not thanks to the pandemic at all?

Tonight, the 1<sup>st</sup> day of Tishrei, the first month of the year 5782, is our 10<sup>th</sup> of Av – the start of something new, beautiful and never-before-possible because we've never been at this point in our journey. Rabbi Shimon changed during his second stay in the cave. I want to change, too. But Rabbi Eleazar emerged just as angry about what he saw in the world while his father set to work making it better. Please God, may I be like Rabbi Shimon and not Rabbi Eleazar!

Good Yontiv

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<sup>6</sup> Feinstein, Rabbi Ed. In a lesson taught to multi-denominational rabbis through the Shalom Hartman Institute. July 115, 2021.