

## Lag Ba'Omer 5781 Emerging from the Cave

Dear Friends,

Today, even as the Jewish community marks the holiday of Lag Ba'Omer, we are mourning the tragedy that took place in Israel last night when dozens of Jews attending the larger Lag Ba'Omer celebrations in Meron were killed or injured in a stampede. As one unified people, when Jews suffer anywhere in the world Jews all over the world feel pain, and so today, even as we acknowledge the joy of Lag Ba'Omer, we do so with a measure of sorrow as well. I encourage all of us to take time today and in the days ahead to recite psalms and pray for healing for those who have been injured, comfort for the families that lost loved ones, and peace for the souls of those that perished in this tragedy.

Lag Ba'Omer is the yahrtzeit of the second century scholar Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai. Rabbi Shimon was one of the most important of the Tannaim, the rabbis whose teachings make up the Mishnah, the collection of rabbinic teachings and legal rulings, which forms the backbone of the Talmud. Rabbi Shimon is one of the most quoted authorities in the Mishnah, quoted more often than such luminaries as Hillel and Shammai (or their followers, the School of Hillel and the School of Shammai), the editor of the Mishnah, Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi (Rabbi Judah the Prince), more than even Rabbi Shimon's own teacher Rabbi Akiva. In addition to being a scholar, Rabbi Shimon was a mystic, and his spiritual greatness is illustrated in the following story, which the Talmud relates about him.

Once, Rabbi Shimon was sitting in a bathhouse with Rabbi Yehudah and Rabbi Yosei. When Rabbi Yehudah spoke up in praise of the Roman government's contributions to the infrastructure of the land of Israel by building markets, bridges and bathhouses, Rabbi Yosei remained silent, but Rabbi Shimon argued that everything the Romans built was in service of their own greed and self-interest. They built markets to have a place for prostitutes to ply their trade, they built bridges so they could collect tolls and taxes, and they built bathhouses for their own enjoyment.

When word reached the Roman government, they rewarded Rabbi Yehudah, exiled the silent Rabbi Yosei, and ordered that Rabbi Shimon be killed. Afraid to go home, Rabbi Shimon took refuge together with his son in the Beit Midrash. However, he became concerned that his wife who brought them bread and water every day would be tortured by the Romans and wind up disclosing his location, and so he and his son, Rabbi Elazar, fled to a cave and hid there. While they were there, the Talmud relates that a miracle occurred for them and a carob tree sprang up in the cave, providing them with their sustenance. Each day after praying they would take off their clothes and cover themselves in sand while they studied, using their clothes only for prayer so that they wouldn't wear out during their time in hiding.

This went on for twelve years until Elijah the prophet came and stood at the entrance of the cave and called out, "Who will inform Bar Yochai that Caesar is dead and that the decree against him has been nullified?" When they heard this, Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Elazar emerged from the cave. But after twelve years of being focused entirely on Torah and spiritual matters, when they saw people spending their time working and playing and engaging in ordinary every day activities, they were incensed. After twelve years in a cave doing nothing but learning Torah, they were at such an elevated spiritual level that their rage manifested itself physically, and everything that they settled their gaze on would go up in flames.

At this point a voice from heaven called out to them, “Did you come out to destroy my world?! Go back to your cave!” So Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Elazar returned to their cave, and waited for another 12 months. At this point they reasoned that since the souls of the wicked are not sentenced to more than 12 months in Gehinom, they ought to be able to leave the cave by this point. At this moment, a voice from heaven called to them once again, beckoning them to leave their cave. This time, Rabbi Elazar still burned the world with his rage, but whatever Rabbi Elazar burned, Rabbi Shimon would heal.

They saw a man running on Friday afternoon close to sunset, carrying two bundles of myrtle. They said to him what do you need these for? He said for the honor of the Sabbath! Why not just one, they replied? He said, one is for the commandment to guard the Sabbath and one for the commandment to remember the Sabbath. At this Rabbi Shimon exclaimed, “See how beloved are the commandments to the Children of Israel!” And their minds were put at ease.

On this anniversary of Rabbi Shimon's death, many of us are going through a process of emerging from a cave ourselves. Perhaps we can learn something from Rabbi Shimon's experience of emerging. To be sure, our caves are not literal caves, but our homes and our apartments, and instead of 13 years, we've been in them for little more than 13 months at the outside, and instead of carobs, those of us who have not been going to the grocery store have had the kindness of neighbors, or the convenience of Amazon Prime and Instacart to sustain us. And instead of engaging in Torah learning day and night, most of us, if we've been lucky enough to still have jobs, have been doing our jobs, and if we haven't, we've been watching Netflix, or scrolling through our social media feeds, or watching cable news, or playing Animal Crossing. And we may not, like Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Elazar, have discovered dangerous new superpowers during the pandemic.

Even so, I think we can relate to their feeling of alienation as they emerged from their cave. After a year's break from ordinary life when even those of us who were still going to work, lost access to friends, family and community, we now begin to emerge. Like Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Elazar, we can expect our emergence to involve some setbacks, proceeding by fits and starts, as we learn to reintegrate into ordinary life. We may not be setting the world on fire with our gaze, but we may emerge from our pandemic caves, only to find reentry more challenging than we had anticipated. We may find we are mentally still stuck in the cave, still in a funk of pandemic-related depression and anxiety. We may find that we simply don't have the appetite for social interaction that we once did before the pandemic.

Rabbi Shimon's emergence was ultimately successful, in spite of his setbacks, because he was able to learn to temper his harsh judgment, and not condemn everything that displeased him to burn right away.

Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Elazar needed time to learn to see the world with eyes that tempered judgment with humility and patience. In the end when they saw the old man running carrying bundles of shrubbery as the sun was going down on Friday afternoon, instead of assuming he was involved in some desecration of the Sabbath (and condemning him with a glance), they were able to stop and ask him questions to try and understand where he was coming from and give him the benefit of the doubt. In the end, they realized he was seeking to honor the Sabbath, not desecrate it. If, like Rabbi Shimon, we can learn to temper our judgment--of ourselves, of others, of the pace of reemergence, of our experience of reemergence-- with patience and humility, I have faith that we too will reemerge successfully, not to the same world we left when we went into our caves, but into a new world and as new people, transformed, and perhaps even elevated by our time in the cave.

Shabbat Shalom!  
Rabbi Garth Silberstein