



Congregation Ner Tamid

on the Greenspun Campus for Jewish Life, Learning, and Spiritual Renewal

Emerging From Our Caves in the Time of Corona

One of the most gratifying changes over the past year has been the rise in interest in adult education, especially the Talmud and Midrash. One of the more puzzling but compelling stories we came across was the Midrash about the life of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (a 2nd-century tannaitic sage living in Judea) who is described in the Talmud (Shabbat 33a) as having spent 12 years in a cave, away from society. When he finally emerges, the Talmud describes fire coming from his eyes and he destroys everything he looks upon!

This puzzling and troubling passage gave me pause to rethink my view of society as we emerge from our isolation of Covid. Sadly, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai emerged from his isolation a broken man. His view of humanity was shattered, and his love of people filled with disappointment. Reading this, one wonders, *"Did he not learn anything in his time of isolation?"* But isolation can serve as a magnifying force. Entering a pessimist, he emerged as an "uber" pessimist. Distrustful of humanity, he emerged with an even greater mistrust than when he entered.

This past year has given us a lot of time to think and reflect. For many it has been a difficult journey. Children unable to attend school in person were hit particularly hard. And our seniors too. But truly, everyone has had their share of challenges, and disappointments. And so, we must ask ourselves whether we will emerge with eyes that burn with sadness and disappointment? Will we emerge more fearful? Will we be upset at those we felt could have done more to reach out to us? Or will we see the world with new eyes and a fresh heart?

While Covid hit us hard, we also found the positive when we looked. Without sounding trite, taking up new hobbies, learning to work from home, getting to know our neighbors, learning new technologies were some wonderful accomplishments. But now we must ask ourselves, will this progress of self-improvement continue? Will we work together to save our environment? Will we continue to grow as human beings? Will we, having known isolation, reach out to those who are home bound to reduce their loneliness? Will we, having known fear, work towards a society that cares more for its elderly?

If one does not see the need for these changes, perhaps they have been living in a cave this past year. And if one does not see, perhaps their eyes are burning, and the pain is too great. It is time. Time to see anew. To understand the world afresh. Time to do something, because now we know it can be done.

Rabbi Sanford Akselrad