

## LEAVING THE CAVE

There is an ancient Jewish legend about a wonder working sage who hid with his son from their oppressors in a cave for twelve years. During that time, they occupied themselves with the study of holy scripture all day long. When it was finally safe to come out, the sage and his son left the cave and tried to return to the world. All around them, they encountered people engaged in the daily tasks of physical survival.

“How dare all these people waste their time on such earthly nonsense instead of contemplating heavenly things!”, they exclaimed. The sage’s anger at people just trying to get along in life became so heated that he burned down everything and everyone on which he cast his eyes.

Horrified, God ordered him, “Go back to your cave!”

When he finally returned to the world, he still looked down with angry disdain on people’s pedestrian pursuits.

One Friday, just before the holy Sabbath began, the sage saw an old man running around, holding fragrant myrtle branches that he had just cut from the earth.

Annoyed, he barked at him, “Don’t you have anything better to do with your time, old man? The holy Sabbath, God’s day, is approaching!”

The old man smiled and said, “Dear Rabbi, what could be better than delivering this myrtle to my friends and family for the Sabbath? They’ll breathe in its fine scent and find themselves at heavenly peace.”

The sage’s burning, righteous anger departed, for he had finally learned that you don’t need to turn your back on earth to get to heaven. Heaven is here on earth, reflected in the daily lives of others.

Some of my fellow rabbis and I recently taught this story to a group of our students across the capital district. We marveled at the way it anticipated, howbeit incidentally, society’s forced sequestering by the oppressive and dangerous COVID virus. We asked our students to think about our gradual re-emergence into the new normal, in light of that sage in the legend. His years of isolation caused him to become a dangerously self-righteous prig spreading a virus of intolerance for the earth and its inhabitants, in the supposed interests of heaven.

We lack that sage's burning power, and hopefully his burning anger as well. Still, I wonder and worry, how will we as individuals and as a society emerge from our COVID caves?

Will we once again embrace the world and its quotidian preoccupations – the stuff of normal human life – after having peered into the abyss of mass death, knowing how we could have so easily been among the dead?

Are we coming back into the world with deepened empathy or a more caustic antipathy and mistrust toward our fellow citizens who are different from us?

Will we heartily embrace each other as we did before COVID, or has that most natural of human encounters been permanently scarred and damaged?

Will we be more compassionate toward those who bear the brunt of COVID, here and around the world; or will we simply leave our collective experience and any newfound empathy behind, casualties of our own survivalist amnesia?

Sadly, these fraught concerns are not sui generis, arising anew for humanity from the pandemic. They are part and parcel of the self-isolating tribalism that has plagued human beings for thousands of years; a cave mentality that partly fuels everything from the dangerous polarization of American politics to the most recent tragic spiraling of violence between Jews and Palestinians. Like the sage of our legend, too many people look upon others in the world with so much habitual fear, rage, and righteousness that they burn the world down.

There is a different way to see each other which can begin to undo this tribalist hatred; currently, America is struggling to model this different way, even though it has always been our purported legacy. In our legend, when the sage finally comes back to the world, he still teeters on the brink of fiery destructiveness, yet one thing has changed: though at first, he has little use for the old man he encounters, he nonetheless is willing to take a moment to speak with him, and in so doing, to hear and see him for who he really is. It is easy to angrily demonize those outside of our tribal caves, to turn them into bloodless, caricatured abstractions unworthy of our sight and our concern. It is much harder for us to encounter each other in our wholeness and our brokenness, to view each other as worlds unto ourselves, with individual narratives and souls. For all our deep problems, our ugly racial history, and our weakened democracy, America as a nation of many peoples and narratives

can still be the one to show the world how to build common purpose through dialogue, ideas, exposure to others, diversity, and simple decency.

This is our task in post COVID America: to model how people can view each other not as the enemy Other, poised for battle from our different caves, but as sisters and brothers dwelling together under one great and open tent.