

Source Sheet and Guiding Study Questions

Tikkun Erev Shavuot 5781: Emerging from the Cave

16 May 2021 at 4:30p

Sponsored by: Congregation Beth Shalom of Clifton Park, Temple Beth El of Troy, Temple Israel of Albany, Congregation Agudat Achim of Schenectady, and Congregation Ohav Shalom of Albany

Introduction

Last year, our communal Zoom Tikkun Erev Shavuot, on the theme of Tikkun Olam, repairing the world, was well-received and people enjoyed the opportunity to get together as a community, but the feedback that we got was that it felt too rushed and overly frontal. This year, we are approaching the event a bit differently. Rather than have each of the rabbis involved teach something different, we want to invite the whole community into a discussion of one text, and the rabbis will serve as facilitators of that conversation. The rabbis also met and studied the text together, and it was out of that study that this source-sheet was born. Our hope is that people study the text individually and come to our Tikkun program ready to discuss together.

The text we chose is from the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate/Masechet Shabbat, Folio 33b-34a, and is the legend (rather than a piece of law, or a discussion) of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai's 13-year stay in a cave, the events that precipitated his fleeing to the cave, as well as the events which occurred after he emerged. The broad themes of this text: our engagement with technology/civilization, the goals of Jewish practice and Torah study, and what it means to return to society after a prolonged absence all felt particularly relevant to us in our current context. This story is long and complex, very literary, and well worth the time necessary to do a close reading. The translation offered in this sheet is the Koren Steinsaltz translation readily available on Sefaria.com. We hope these guiding questions will help you as you study.

Overall Guiding Questions

The word **Tikkun** (like Tikkun Olam, and Tikkun Erev Shavuot) means to establish, to correct, to improve. It is a word which repeats over and over throughout this story. What is established/corrected in this story? Who does those actions? What changes with regard to Tikkun from the beginning to the end?

Characters: Do you find any positive role models in this story? Negative role models? Do any of the characters change in the course of the story? Who and in what way?

Life of Torah: What is the ideal of a life of Torah in this text?

Section One: Civilization in Theory

Rabbi Yehuda is described as head of the speakers in every place. The Gemara asks: **And why did they call him head of the speakers in every place?** The Gemara relates that this resulted due to an incident that took place **when Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Yosei and Rabbi Shimon were sitting, and Yehuda, son of converts, sat beside them.**

Rabbi Yehuda opened and said: How pleasant are the actions of this nation, the Romans, as they established marketplaces, established bridges, and established bathhouses. Rabbi Yosei was silent. Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai responded and said: Everything that they established, they established only for their own purposes. They established marketplaces, to place prostitutes in them; bathhouses, to pamper themselves; and

bridges, to collect taxes from all who pass over them. Yehuda, son of converts, went and related their statements to his household, and those statements continued to spread until they were heard by the monarchy. They ruled and said: Yehuda, who elevated the Roman regime, shall be elevated and appointed as head of the Sages, the head of the speakers in every place. Yosei, who remained silent, shall be exiled from his home in Judea as punishment, and sent to the city of Tzippori in the Galilee. And Shimon, who denounced the government, shall be killed.

Guiding Questions about Section One

Worldly things: What "worldly things" or secular aspects of civilization appear in this text?

What are the different attitudes expressed towards them?

How might these attitudes apply to our own life with technology and "worldly things"?

Section Two: Emerging from the Cave

Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai **and his son, Rabbi Elazar, went and hid in the study hall. Every day Rabbi Shimon's wife would bring them bread and a jug of water and they would eat. When the decree intensified, Rabbi Shimon said to his son: Women are easily impressionable and, therefore, there is room for concern lest the authorities torture her and she reveal our whereabouts. They went and they hid in a cave. A miracle occurred and a carob tree was created for them as well as a spring of water. They would remove their clothes and sit covered in sand up to their necks. They would study Torah all day in that manner. At the time of prayer, they would dress, cover themselves, and pray, and they would again remove their clothes afterward so that they would not become tattered. They sat in the cave for twelve years. Elijah the Prophet came and stood at the entrance to the cave and said: Who will inform bar Yoḥai that the emperor died and his decree has been abrogated?**

They emerged from the cave, and saw people who were plowing and sowing. Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai said: These people abandon eternal life of Torah study and engage in temporal life for their own sustenance. The Gemara relates that every place that Rabbi Shimon and his son Rabbi Elazar directed their eyes was immediately burned. A Divine Voice emerged and said to them: Did you emerge from the cave in order to destroy My world? Return to your cave. They again went and sat there for twelve months. They said: The judgment of the wicked in Gehenna lasts for twelve months. Surely their sin was atoned in that time. A Divine Voice emerged and said to them: Emerge from your cave. They emerged. Everywhere that Rabbi Elazar would strike, Rabbi Shimon would heal. Rabbi Shimon said to Rabbi Elazar: My son, you and I suffice for the entire world.

As the sun was setting on Shabbat eve, they saw an elderly man who was holding two bundles of myrtle branches and running at twilight. They said to him: Why do you have these? He said to them: In honor of Shabbat. They said to him: And let one suffice. He answered them: One is corresponding to: "Remember the Shabbat day, to keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8), and one is corresponding to: "Observe the Shabbat day, to keep it holy" (Deuteronomy 5:12). Rabbi Shimon said to his son: See how beloved the mitzvot are to Israel. Their minds were put at ease.

Guiding Questions about Section Two

Isolation: In what ways it is easier or harder to be holy in a cave?

In what ways is it easier and harder to strive for holiness out in the world?

How might people be changed or affected when they live in isolation for a long period of time?

Life of Torah: What is the ideal of a life of Torah in this text?

Is it to spend all of one's time in study?

Is it about the quantity of knowledge, or about how Torah is lived in the world?

Section Three: Civilization in Practice

Rabbi Pinehas ben Ya'ir, Rabbi Shimon's son-in-law, heard and went out to greet him. He brought him into the bathhouse and began tending to his flesh. He saw that Rabbi Shimon had cracks in the skin on his body. He was crying, and the tears fell from his eyes and caused Rabbi Shimon pain. Rabbi Pinehas said to Rabbi Shimon, his father-in-law: Woe is me, that I have seen you like this. Rabbi Shimon said to him: Happy are you that you have seen me like this, as had you not seen me like this, you would not have found in me this prominence in Torah, as the Gemara relates: At first, when Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai would raise a difficulty, Rabbi Pinehas ben Ya'ir would respond to his question with twelve answers. Ultimately, when Rabbi Pinehas ben Ya'ir would raise a difficulty, Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai would respond with twenty-four answers.

Rabbi Shimon said: Since a miracle transpired for me, I will go and repair something for the sake of others in gratitude for God's kindness, as it is written: "And Jacob came whole to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, when he came from Paddan-aram; and he graced the countenance of the city" (Genesis 33:18). Rav said, the meaning of: And Jacob came whole, is: **Whole in his body, whole in his money, whole in his Torah.** And what did he do? **And he graced the countenance of the city;** he performed gracious acts to benefit the city. Rav said: Jacob established a currency for them. And Shmuel said: He established marketplaces for them. And Rabbi Yoḥanan said: He established bathhouses for them. He said: **Is there something that needs repair? They said to him: There is a place where there is uncertainty with regard to ritual impurity and the priests are troubled by being forced to circumvent it,** as it is prohibited for them to become ritually impure from contact with a corpse. There was suspicion, but no certainty, that a corpse was buried there. Therefore, they were unable to definitively determine its status. Rabbi Shimon said: **Is there a person who knows that there was a presumption of ritual purity here?** Is there anyone who remembers a time when this place was not considered ritually impure, or that at least part of it was considered to be ritually pure? **An Elder said to him: Here ben Zakkai planted and cut the teruma of lupines.** In this marketplace Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, who himself was a priest, once planted lupines that were given to him as *teruma*. On that basis, the conclusion can be drawn that it was definitely ritually pure. Rabbi Shimon, like Jacob, **also did so** and took steps to improve the city and examined the ground. **Everywhere that the ground was hard, he pronounced it ritually pure** as there was certainly no corpse there, **and every place that the ground was soft, he marked it** indicating that perhaps a corpse was buried there. In that way, he purified the place so that even priests could walk through it.

A certain Elder said in ridicule and surprise: **Ben Yoḥai purified the cemetery.** Rabbi Shimon got angry and said to him: **Had you not been with us, and even had you been with us and were not counted with us** in rendering this ruling, what **you say is fine.** You could have said that you were unaware of my intention or that you did not agree or participate in this decision. **Now that you were with us and were counted with us** in rendering this ruling, you will cause people to say that Sages are unwilling to cooperate with one another. **They will say:** If competing prostitutes still **apply makeup to each other** to help one another look beautiful, **all the more so that Torah scholars should cooperate with each other.** He directed his eyes toward him and the Elder died. Rabbi Shimon **went out to the marketplace and he saw Yehuda, son of converts.** Rabbi Shimon, said: **This one still has a place in the world? He directed his eyes toward him and turned him into a pile of bones.**

Guiding Questions about Section Three

Characters: Does Rabbi Shimon bar Yoahi change in the course of the story? In what ways?

Worldly things: How has the attitude of the text toward worldly things shifted throughout the story?

What does the text seem to conclude about "worldly things"?

Tikkun: Jacob "establishes" the same things that Rome did at the top—what do you make of that?

Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai "repairs/effects tikkun of" the place of uncertain purity—how is this use of the world similar/different from the use that gets translated "established"?

Conclusion

We hope you enjoyed learning this text, and that you join Rabbis Beverly Magidson, Dan Ornstein, Rena Kieval, Robert Kasman, Chanan Markowitz, Sue Gulack, David Eligberg, and Rafi Spitzer as we study it together at our Tikkun Erev Shavuot. The themes that run throughout are ones which are particularly relevant as we imagine emerging from our pandemic isolation.

Registration is required for this event at this link: [Register Here](#)

Overall concluding questions

Isolation: What has been easier and harder for us during the pandemic?

Have there been aspects of Judaism or holiness that have been easier?

In what ways?

A life of Torah: What does this text imply about the interaction between studying Torah and living in the "real world"?

Does the text *as a whole* have a different message than those of the characters within the text?

Tikkun: What will be the 'tikkun' for the world that each of us offers/hopes for/strives for as we emerge from the 'cave' of the pandemic?

How do we heal and not burn up the world?

How do you bring your positive 'cave-learning' out into the world and keep using it?

What is the ultimate teaching, or teachings, of this text?