# Back to the Cave! Rabbi Shimon Bar Yoḥai's Dilemma: Torah or *Tikkun Olam*?

Noam Zion

## Introduction: The Rabbinic Turn Toward Social Activism

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks tells a hasidic tale about rebuking an overzealous scholar, which echoes God's critique of the great scholar-cum-mystic Shimon bar Yoḥai. That rebuke led to the latter's spiritual transformation into an activist reformer. The tale is as follows:

> [Rabbi Dov Ber of Mezritch][1] was once so intent on his studies that he failed to hear the cries of his baby son. His father[2] heard, and went down and took the baby in his arms until he went to sleep again. Then he went approached his son, still intent on his books, and said, "My son, I do not know what you are studying, but it is not the study of Torah if it makes you deaf to the cry of a child."

Jonathan Sacks sums up the message as follows: "To live the life of faith is to hear the cry of the afflicted, the lonely and marginal, the poor, the sick and disempowered, and to respond. For the world is not yet mended, there is work still to do, and God has empowered us to do it—with him, for him, and for his faith in us."[3]

Like this overly studious rabbi, Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai (also known as Rashbi) was so absorbed in his own learning that he could not hear the needs of others or appreciate those who were engaged in taking care of the material needs of people. He was drawn to the *vita*

*contemplativa* at the expense of *tikkun olam*—that is, his intellectual life was so absorbing that he could not hear the pressing needs for repairing the world. He was committed uncompromisingly to an unworldly, even anti-worldly, Torah. Yet, as we shall see in the literary masterpiece to be analyzed in this essay, the rabbis re-imagined his career as transformed into a life of moderate *tikkun olam*. While this tale may have little to recommend it as a historical document, it has much to teach us of the ancient rabbis' rationale of world-affirming reform and of the attractions and excesses of world-destroying spiritual and political revolution.

Conceptually, this essay contributes to a nuanced view of the now popular term *tikkun olam*. That term, popular in American Jewish parlance, can refer to anything that purports to improve something in the world—whether a large-scale redistribution of wealth and power, a pursuit of social justice in a particular sector of society, or even the smallest act of human kindness, such as the grandfather comforting the crying baby, in the story brought by Sacks. In rabbinic law, the concept of *tikkun ha-olam*,[4] as well as the linguistically related concept of takkanot (legislation or amendments of the law), often apply to legal predicaments that may have potentially untoward results for the functioning of society. In that sense, the ideal of *tikkun* is not about revolutionizing a corrupt system but rather about making piecemeal improvements to an imperfect world. Mystical meanings of *tikkun* in the Zohar and in its Lurianic interpretation need not be considered here. But it is interesting to note that the putative author of the Zohar, the second-century sage Rashbi, is the hero of a tale that often uses the root of the word *tikkun* in a wholly non-mystical, mundane context. *Tikkun* refers in this narrative to Roman institution-building (bridges, markets, public baths)—which Rashbi initially condemns in revolutionary terms, along with all earthly pursuits of greater material amenities. At the beginning of the tale, Rashbi is politically and spiritually committed to an uncompromising rejection of mundane civilization, whether Roman or Jewish. He

seeks a radical *tikkun ha-olam* (although he himself does not use that term), in the sense of wanting to destroy what is and to create instead an alternative world free of bodily dependence. Yet by the end of the narrative, it is Rashbi himself who has been fixed or repaired—and I use the term *tikkun* here metaphorically, to describe Rashbi's self-corective process of repentance. He becomes a judicial authority and municipal activist who fixes up the markets and enjoys the baths. Within this tale there is implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) a debate between various understandings of what it means to "fix the world." By analyzing this fascinating narrative in depth, perhaps we can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of *tikkun olam*, which understands the danger of extremists, whose revolutionary or even antinomian efforts may lead to destruction, and seeks to temper radical approaches to *tikkun olam* with a more moderate approach, which sees law as a positive force that can effect piecemeal reform and improvement in the world.

## Shimon Bar Yoḥai's Cave (B. Shabbat 33b–34a)[5]

Prologue

Rabbi Judah and Rabbi Yose and Rabbi Shimon [bar Yoḥai] were sitting, and Judah ben Gerim [literally, "Judah son of converts"] was sitting beside them.

Act I: Crime and Punishment

*Scene 1: The Debate*

Rabbi Judah opened and said, "How pleasant are the acts of this nation: they established (tiknu) markets; they established bathhouses; they established bridges!"

Rabbi Yose was silent.

Rashbi answered and said, "Everything they established, they established only for their own needs: They established

markets—to place prostitutes there; bathhouses—to pamper themselves; bridges—to take tolls."

Judah ben Gerim went and retold their words, and it became known to the government.

*Scene 2: The Verdict*

They [i.e., the Roman government] said: "Judah who extolled—let him be extolled. Yose who was silent—let him be exiled to Sepphoris. Shimon who disparaged—let him be killed."

Act II: The Great Escape

*Scene 1: Beit Ha-Midrash*

He [Rashbi] went with his son and hid in the academy (*beit midrash*). Each day his wife brought them bread and a jug of water and they ate. When the decree became more severe, he said to his son, "Women's minds are easily changed. They may torture her (*m'tza·arah*) and she will reveal [us]."

*Scene 2: The Cave*

He went and together they hid in a cave. A miracle happened for them and a carob tree and a spring were created for them. By day they sat and studied, removing their clothes and sitting up to their necks in sand. When the time came to pray, they went out and dressed and covered themselves and went out and prayed. Then again they took off their clothes, in order that they should not wear out. They dwelled in a cave for twelve years.

Act III: The Reprieve, Its Revocation, and Rehabilitation

*Scene 1: Elijah*

Elijah came to the opening of the cave. He said, "Who will inform Bar Yoḥai that the emperor has died and the decree is annulled?"

They [i.e., Rashbi and his son] went out and they saw men plowing

and sowing. They said, "They forsake eternal life (*ḥayyei olam*) and busy themselves with temporal life (*ḥayyei sha·ah*)?!" Everywhere they turned their eyes [in disapproval] was immediately burned. A heavenly voice went out and said to them, "Did you go out to destroy My world?! Return to your cave!"

*Scene 2: The Heavenly Voice*

They dwelled [in the cave] for [an additional] twelve months. They[6] said, "The sentence of the wicked in Hell[7] is twelve months." A heavenly voice went out [and said], "Go out from your cave." They went out. Wherever Rabbi Eleazar [Rashbi's son] smote, Rashbi healed.

He said, "My son, you and I are sufficient for the world."

*Scene 3: Shabbat Spices*

They saw a certain old man who was holding two branches of myrtle running at twilight.

They said to him, "Why do you need these?"

He said to them, "To honor the Sabbath."

[They said:] "Would not one suffice for you?"

He said, "One for [the command] *Remember* [*the Sabbath*, Exodus 20:8] and one for *Observe* [*the Sabbath*, Deuteronomy 5:12]."

He [Rashbi] said to him [his son:] "See how dear is a commandment (*mitzvah*) to Israel!"

[Their minds were set at ease.]

*Scene 4: The Bathhouse*

Rabbi Pinḥas ben Yair, [Rashbi's] father-in-law, heard and went out to greet him. He took him to the bathhouse. He [Pinḥas ben Yair] was massaging his [Rashbi's] flesh. He saw that there were clefts in his flesh. He was weeping and the tears were falling from his eyes and hurting (*m'tza·ari*) him [i.e., Rashbi].

He said to him, "Alas that I see you so!"

He replied, "Happy that you see me so. For if you did not see me so, you would not find me so [learned]." For originally when Rashbi raised an objection, Rabbi Pinḥas ben Yair solved it with twelve solutions. Subsequently [i.e., after studying in the cave for thirteen years] when Rabbi Pinḥas ben Yair objected, Rashbi solved it with twenty-four solutions.[8]

Act IV: Restitution and Tikkun

*Scene 1: Jacob's Model*

He [Rashbi] said, "Since a miracle occurred, I will go and fix (*atkin*) something, since it says, 'And Jacob came whole (*shaleim*)' (Genesis 33:18)."

Rav [who explicated that same verse] said, "Whole in his body, whole in his money, whole in his Torah, as the verse says: 'and he [Jacob] showed grace to (*va-yiḥan*; literally, "camped before") the city, and Jacob fixed (va-yiken; literally "purchased") a field...' (Genesis 33:18)."

Rav said, "He established (tikkein) coinage for them."[9]

Samuel said, "He established (tikkein) markets for them."

Rabbi Yoḥanan said, "He established (tikkein) bathhouses for them."

*Scene 2: Urban Renewal and its Detractors*

He [Rashbi] said, "Is there something to fix (*l'takkonei*)?"

They said to him, "There is a place of doubtful impurity and it bothers (*tza·ara*, literally "causes pain"), since the priests need to go around it [i.e., to avoid walking on an area suspected of impurity]."

He said, "Does anyone know if there was a presumption of purity here?"

A certain old man said, "Here and there [Yoḥanan] ben Zakkai cut down lupine beans for *t'rumah*."[10] He [Rashbi] did

the same [i.e., treating at least part of the ground as pure]. Wherever it [the ground] was hard packed, he [Rashbi] ruled it pure. Wherever it was loose [where a potential grave might have been dug], he marked it [as potentially impure, so the priests could simply avoid that spot without going around the whole field].

A certain old man said [derisively], "The son of Yoḥai made a cemetery pure."[11]

He [Rashbi] replied, "If you had not been with us, or even if you had been with us but had not voted with us, you would have spoken well. But now that you were with us and voted among us, should they say: '[Even] prostitutes daub make-up on one another [to make them look better]'? How much the more so [should] scholars [protect one another's public face from shame]!"[12]

He [Rashbi] cast his eyes at him and his soul departed.

Epilogue: Payback Time for an Informer

He [Rashbi] went out to the market. He saw Judah ben Gerim. [He said,] "Is this one still in the world?" He set his eyes upon him and made him a heap of bones.

## The Dilemma: *Vita Contemplativa or Vita Activa*?

The rabbis debated: what is more important—*talmud* or *ma·aseh*, study or action? Rabbi Tarfon argued for action and Rabbi Akiva for study. The assembled scholars responded in a way that recognized the validity of each view and softened the opposition between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*, as the Romans called the alternatives in this perennial debate. They concluded: "Greater is *talmud torah*." But why? "Because study leads to action."[13] Most rabbis sought to maintain a balance between intellectual pursuit

and worldly activity, Oral Torah and *derekh eretz*, to sustain human civilization.[14]

Yet a few rabbis did live only for the life of the mind, without any intention that their study should be for the purpose of preparing themselves to better the world. *Torah li-sh'mah*, study for its own sake as an end in itself, was their calling—and they condemned those who used study simply as an means to get ahead on the ladder of social prestige, disdaining those who engaged in worldly work. Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai was one such militant eccentric, who not only retreated from the world to an ivory tower but who in fact devalued the whole material world, together with all earthly creativity and productivity. Bar Yoḥai dismissed the value of simple farmers, as well as pretentious political leaders—whether Roman or Jewish—who devoted their lives to public service by improving the facilities of municipal life, thus improving the quality of everyday life. His conception of a life of Torah is not justified by the rationale that resolved the debate between his own teacher, Rabbi Akiva, and Rabbi Tarfon: "*Talmud* (study) is greater because it brings about *ma·aseh* (action)." Bar Yoḥai would accept no compromises—at least, not until the rabbis constructed a different ending to the story of his life as a revolutionary.

## Bar Yoḥai's Single-Minded Commitment to *Torah Li-sh'mah*, Torah Study for Its Own Sake

By reading the tale of the cave against the backdrop of other rabbinic textual material about Rashbi, we can see how radically the rabbis reconstructed both his personality and his ideology, in their surprise ending. Bar Yoḥai's repentance is uncharacteristic for an individual so exceptionally arrogant about his own knowledge of Torah. He is reported to have said:

> I [by my value] could exempt the whole world from punishment, from the day I was born until now. And if Eleazar my son were with me, [we could exempt it] from the time that the world was created until now…
> I have seen those destined to ascend [i.e., the spiritual elite who will gain access to divine knowledge] and they are few. If they are one thousand, I and my son are among them. If one hundred, I and my son are among them. If two, I and my son are they.[15]

Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai devalues anything but Torah, and anyone but brilliant male Jews. When discussing the cause of a plague called *askara*, Bar Yoḥai explains: "It is caused by the sin of neglect of Torah,"[16] and he maintains that theory againt all statistical evidence to the contrary:

> They said to Rashbi: "[The case of] women disproves [your scientific claim that *askara* is a disease caused exclusively by neglect of Torah, for women are exempt from Torah study, yet they too contract that disease]."
> [But Rashbi could respond:] "They cause their husbands to neglect Torah!"
> [They countered:] "Gentiles disprove [your claim, for gentiles are exempt from Torah study, yet they too contract that disease]."
> [He responded:] "But they cause Israel to neglect Torah!"
> [They countered:] "Children disprove [your claim, for they are minors exempt from Torah study, yet they too contract that disease]."
> [He responded:] "But they cause their fathers to neglect Torah!"[17]

Even though Bar Yoḥai's wife had been his mainstay while he was hiding in the beit *midrash*, he nevertheless denigrated her character and gave her no credit. Life is dependent, he argued, solely on Torah

study. Therefore Rashbi burned to death those farmers who devoted their time to agriculture, while God intervened to feed him and his son by creating a carob tree and revealing a spring in the cave, so that he did not need to concern himself about physical needs while studying Torah. The following text illustrates this point:

> Our rabbis taught: "You shall gather in your new grain" (Deuteronomy 11:14). What does this teach? [It sets a limit on the interpretation of another verse,] which says, "Let not this Torah cease from your lips [but recite it day and night]" (Joshua 1:8). Should this [second] verse be taken literally?
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> No, for the first verse teaches, "You shall gather in your new grain"—that is, perform worldly occupations (*derekh eretz*) together with them (*talmud torah*)." These are the words of Rabbi Ishmael.
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> However, Rashbi says: "Is it possible that a man should plow in plowing season, sow in sowing season, harvest in harvest season, thresh in threshing season, and winnow when the wind blows? What, then, would become of Torah?! Rather: When Israel fulfills the will of God, their work is done by others, as it is said: "Strangers shall stand and pasture your flocks; [aliens shall be your plowmen and vine-trimmers]" (Isaiah 61:5). When they do not fulfill the will of God, they themselves must do their own work, as it is said: "You shall gather in your new grain" (Deuteronomy 11:14). And even more so, they have to do the work of others, as it is written: "You shall serve your enemy" (Deuteronomy 28:48).
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> Abaye said, "Many acted in accordance with Rabbi Ishmael and they prospered; those who acted in accordance with Rashbi did not prosper.
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> Rava said to the sages: "I ask you not to appear before me [to study] in the month of Nisan and in the month of Tishrei

> [i.e., during the spring planting and fall harvesting seasons], in order that you not be distracted by concern for your sustenance during the rest of the year."[18]

Abaye's critique of Bar Yoḥai is wryly pragmatic and self-serving, while Rava demonstrates a moral concern for the welfare of his community of non-scholars whose Torah study is to be integrated with maintaining their economic basis for survival without relying on miracles. Rashbi, in this view, cares neither for his own prosperity nor for that of the community.

## The Historical Context: Sedition against and Secession from Society

Bar Yoḥai's critique of material culture applies with special vehemence to the Roman political and economic imperialism that destroyed Torah study in Judea. The story of the cave is dramatically set some seventy years after the Romans had destroyed all of Jerusalem; it takes place in the immediate aftermath of the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132–135 C.E.), which totally depopulated Judea and left only a tiny remnant in the Galilee.

Rashbi's own teacher, Rabbi Akiva—who, as we saw above, preferred study to action—had taken a religious–political position in supporting the revolt against Rome, declaring Bar Koziba to be the Messiah and renaming him Bar Kokhba.[19] Akiva was later imprisoned and tortured by the Romans; he died as a martyr while reciting the Shema and affirming his belief in God, even as he was scourged with iron combs raking off his skin in the arena of Caesarea.[20] The crime for which Akiva was punished was his refusal to stop teaching Torah publicly after the failure of the Bar Kokhba Revolt. The tradition reports that he ordained five rabbis; after the collapse of the revolt in 135 C.E. and the depopulation of all the Jews of the Land of Israel (except for the northern Galilee area), these five rabbis were the only

hope to keep alive the long oral tradition that had been brought to its peak by Rabbi Akiva, who would soon be captured and executed by the Romans. One of these five young rabbis was Shimon bar Yoḥai; another was Rabbi Judah son of Ilai (who was probably the debating partner called simply "Judah" in our story).

Rabbi Shimon Bar Yoḥai's vilification of Roman culture—or its "anti-culture," as he understands it—is more readily understood in light of this cycle of political, national, and biographical traditions. The three rabbis were discussing Roman civilization, and they were most likely doing so in Roman-occupied Galilee. After the destruction of the last war, they may have been contemplating the reconstruction or urban renewal brought by the Romans to the war-ravaged Land of Israel. When the Roman Empire (especially under Hadrian) built buildings, roads, aqueducts, and bridges, however, they left their cultural mark on their world-renowned engineering feats, which were named for and probably decorated with their pagan statues and the reliefs of deified emperors. The spread of Roman material civilization was thus a conscious ideology of emperors. The rabbis responded in different ways to the Empire's physical transformation of the face of the Land of Israel.

Rabbi Judah praised the Romans for *tikkun*: "for building markets, for building bridges, and building public baths." He related to the national enemy objectively and ignored the Roman Empire's status as a national or imperial military oppressor and as a society promoting religious paganism, even emperor worship. From a neutral, pragmatic perspective, he saw the massive building program as good government that benefits its citizens. Rome's historic function was not to create a new civilization, but rather to take the Hellenistic civilization that it had conquered and establish it firmly on the whole of the Mediterranean world.[21] Politically, the Roman achievement was to turn the whole world into a single country—uniting conquerors and conquered in one community.[22]

Why did Rabbi Judah feel it important to open this conversation with such praise? Was he baiting Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai "to get a rise out of him"? Was he trying to put a positive face on a process of incremental imperial conquest that could not be stopped? When we first hear Rabbi Judah begin to praise a nation for pleasant acts, we would probably expect the nation to be Israel and the acts to be *mitzvot*.[23] But the object of Rabbi Judah's praise was Rome—whose pursuit of conspicuous consumption and populist entertainment, often sadistic and murderous, angered Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai.

Actually, Israel is commanded to engage in such acts of *tikkun ha-olam*—meaning, literally: construction of the world for human habitation. According to Moshe Halbertal the earliest use of the term *tikkun ha-olam* in rabbinic sources appears in the Mishnah, where a legal reform (*tikkun*) is instituted to permit marriage and procreation.[24] Halbertal has suggested that the term originally refers to the **civilizational mission** to settle the world—embraced not only by Rome, but also by the rabbinic understanding of God's partnership with human beings. In this *mishnah*, the value of procreation is buttressed with a verse from Isaiah 45:18 that speaks of God's concern that human beings help settle the earth and not leave it as an uninhabited chaos (*toḥu va-voḥu*), as it was before God's creation.

In the discussion among the three rabbis, Rabbi Yose was silent. Why? Did he have no opinion about this hot political topic? The text says that he "kept silent" (*shatak*)—suggesting that he did have an objection of some sort, but he chose to suppress it. This may have been due to fear of Roman retaliation, or fear of challenging the firebrand Bar Yoḥai, or perhaps even prudence in the face of a bystander—Judah ben Gerim, who might have then relayed the conversation to his parents, who were of pagan origin.[25] (Note that Judah ben Gerim is not the same person as Rabbi Judah.) Our story appears in a larger talmudic context dealing with the dangers of gossip. It is possible that Judah ben Gerim was irresponsible in gossiping about Rashbi,

and Rabbi Yose thus maintained his silence in order not to risk the dissemination of even more *lashon ha-ra* (gossip).[26]

Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai condemned all of the Roman accomplishments out of hand, and he reinterpreted the "generosity" of Roman government toward its Jewish citizens as a self-serving cult of the body and of material benefit—existing only to exact tolls, promote prostitution, and pamper the body. Had our text given Rabbi Judah a voice in responding to Bar Yoḥai, perhaps he would have replied along the following lines:

- True, the imperial government is not interested altruistically in the well-being of its residents and citizens; but there may still be some benefit to be reaped, even if it originates from a place of self-interest.
- Thanks to its extensive roadworks, Rome is helping the world to become more closely connected, enhancing trade and communication; pax romana unifies much of the civilized world.
- The baths, the epitome of Roman culture, cultivate not only physical pleasures but also promote good hygiene; they also provide a public culture where citizens meet to exchange views.

In the end, Judah ben Gerim relays the conversation to others, who perhaps inform on Bar Yoḥai or perhaps simply pass on the gossip. Not surprisingly, Roman intelligence-gathering is adequate to catch the heretical and seditious arguments by suspected rabbinic revolutionaries.

## Father and Son Hiding Out: Spiritual Retreat to the *Beit Midrash* and to the Cave

Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai and his son escape, first to the *beit midrash* and then to a miracle cave. Both of these venues represent not only

temporary hiding places, but in fact alternative, competing worlds to the world of Roman civilization. Let us examine how this is so.

1. The *beit midrash*, the study hall, represents the values of the Jews' **civilizational mission**. According to the rabbis, "a person who has no knowledge of Bible, Mishnah, or the ways of the world (*derekh eretz*) is not one of the *yishuv*"[27] (i.e., one who belongs to the settled world, such as a citizen of the *polis*). Such a person ought to withdraw to the desert and their testimony is not acceptable in court. To maintain his standing as a civilized person Bar Yoḥai must continue to study, so he must take his son with him as a *ḥevruta*, a study partner, in order to continue to pursue Torah's oral, dialogic culture.
2. The *beit midrash* is a **retreat from the world of Roman conquest to a world of intellect**, not concerned with the earthly task of civilization that belongs to the temporal and social world (*ḥayyei sha·ah*).
3. The cave is not a human institution but is rather a **return to a natural haven, a Garden of Eden** where primordial waters flow and miraculous trees nourish and sustain both knowledge and life. It is **a retreat from all human civilization**, not merely a political protest against the latest empire. Perhaps that is why Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai and his son remove all their clothes: they are nude, as were Adam and Eve in their state of innocent bliss in the Garden.
4. Bar Yoḥai's solitude is not only a political necessity; in fact, it is a spiritual choice. In ways it is reminiscent of fourth-century Christian monks (whose name derives from the Greek word *monos*, meaning "solitary"), who withdrew from society in order to live in absolute solitude. Originally monks lived alone in caves (not in groups in monasteries), and they were called "hermits." The turn to the desert is often called a "conversion," quite literally a "turning away" from society to the desert as the ideal **place of spirituality**.

5. The removal of clothing may represent **transcendence of the body**. Prayer seems to require a higher form of modesty or mental concentration than does studying. For prayer, one must wear clothes; and so, ostensibly to save them from wearing out,[28] Bar Yoḥai and his son remove their clothes while studying and cover themselves up to their necks in sand, as an alternative form of covering their bodies. The narrator paints a picture of two talking heads buried up to their necks in the cave, and yet studying incessantly. Here, then, is **a retreat from one's own body**, one's own physical embodiment at birth, and it hearkens to the pre-birth world as a place where the child learns Torah before entering this world.[29] Rashbi and his son have buried themselves, their bodies, as if dying in body but being spiritually reborn as mono-functioning intellects, disembodied minds. In fact, this line of interpretation would be even clearer if they had stopped praying—for Rashbi elsewhere remarks that he would have wished for two mouths: one to pray for temporal needs and one to study Torah.[30] If prayer is about requesting divine aid for worldly needs (and rabbinically, *t'fillah* refers only to the Amidah), then in the cave where all needs are taken care of miraculously there is no reason to pray.
6. The cave may also be **a foretaste of the rabbinic world to come, where one studies all day**.[31] The cave is at once a foretaste of the world to come as well as a throwback to both the Garden of Eden and to the womb. Yet while the images of the womb and the Garden of Eden include women (as mother and as lover), the cave is not only womanless (as is the rabbinic beit midrash), but is in fact suspicious of women. We may well ask: Why does Rashbi so distrust his wife and all women? Why doesn't he appreciate her help in keeping him alive with food and water while he and his son hide, fugitives from his own impulsive mouthing-off against the Romans?

7. Rabbinic society, like the Greek philosophical culture, has a misogynist theme related to the privileging of the intellect over the body—hence, of men over women. It is for this same reason that Bar Yoḥai will later dismiss (and even kill) the *am ha-aretz*, the culturally ignorant farmer—just as he cursed the Romans, who were engaged in material culture. All of these value priorities and oppositions are congruent: male/intellect (i.e., the world of Torah) versus female/*am ha-aretz*/non-Jews (i.e., the world of secular civilization).
8. If all civilization is suspect, as Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai's condemnation of Roman material civilization implies, then procreation is also superfluous—because therein lies the main value of women and the purpose of marriage. The ideal couple of the Garden—man and woman—has been displaced by the ideal rabbinic couple: father and son studying Torah.
9. Bar Yoḥai is suspicious of women (including his devoted, supportive wife), because they are considered weak-minded, weak in character, or easily influenced (*da·atan kalah*). While this characterization may sometimes refers to women's vulnerability to sexual seduction, here it refers to their lack of fortitude to resist interrogation when subjected to Roman torture.

Our analysis of this text suggests that we see here a **three-way cultural battle**. Initially there are three realms, with the beit *midrash* supported by the low technology of simple village life in the Land of Israel: farmers plow, and wives serve the scholars.[32] The *beit midrash* is allied with simple Jews who are supportive of the *beit midrash* and who resent high culture's introduction of taxation and prostitution and elite bathhouses (that resemble today's country clubs). The beit midrash keeps to basics so as not to be tempted by material luxuries and so as not to overburden the poor people who support them. It represents national solidarity marshaled against the foreign invader. The following chart makes clear these relationships:

| ***Beit Midrash*** | **Wife / Farmer** | **Romans** |
|---|---|---|
| Torah culture | low culture (bread, jug) | high culture (markets, etc.) |
| Torah society | elementary society (marriage) | complex society |
| Torah knowledge | easily changed mind | secular knowledge (technology) |

Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai undergoes a significant shift, from his initial alliance with the people against the Roman Empire, to his later condemnation of the simple Jewish farmers—as if they were as bad as the Roman bridge-builders. Both fall together, for him, under the pejorative rubric of *ḥayyei sha·ah*—that is, focused only on temporal life. Ultimately, this stance will alienate Bar Yoḥai from God-the-Creator, who appears to be at odds with the God-of-Torah in the cave. The move to the cave pits Rashbi against two alternative worlds: that of the Romans, as well as that of the simple Jew—and, thus, God's creation.[33] Rashbi is, then, not merely a political freedom fighter against colonialism, but he is in fact an ascetic nihilist.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, in his book *The Sabbath*, portrays Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai as a radical critic of Roman materialism, viewing their building projects not in terms of their products—civilization or *tikkun olam*—but only in terms of their motives and their implicit theology—self-idolization:

> Rome was at the height of her glory…Signs of immense progress in administration, engineering, and the art of construction were widely visible….Rabbi Shimon fled from the world where eternity was the attribute of a city and went to the cave where he found a way to endow life with a quality of eternity![34]

It was not the force of despair that bred Rabbi Shimon's contempt for the affairs of this world. Behind his blunt repudiation of worldliness, we may discern a thirst for the treasures of eternity and a sense of horror at seeing how people were wasting their lives in the pursuit of temporary life, thus neglecting the pursuit of eternal life.

## The First Reprieve and Its Revocation

In the talmudic tale, Elijah appears to announce the end of the Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai's persecution: "Elijah came to the opening of the cave. He said, 'Who will inform Bar Yoḥai that the emperor has died and the decree is annulled?'" Here, Elijah's task as an angel of God is to bring good tidings: the persecution is over. Rome itself has not fallen, but the cruel emperor who sought to suppress Judaism (most probably Hadrian) is no longer.[35]

As Bar Yoḥai returns, leaving his "temporary" political asyltum furnished with only a bare minimum of necessities for life, he should be happy to re-enter the real world. Jews living in the Land of Israel no longer need to fear the suppression of Torah study; there is freedom of thought, without fear of uttering remarks that might be seen as seditious or traitorous. We might now expect Rashbi to become the new redeemer, similar to Moses. After all, Rashbi's life-story recalls that of Moses: he too rebelled against tyranny (Pharaoh) and then fled (to Midian), and was later recalled (to Egypt) by God's announcement that it was safe to return (Exodus 4:19). Upon his return from exile, Moses became the prophet of liberation from Pharaoh; so too, perhaps upon his return from hiding Rashbi will likewise seek to aid his oppressed Jewish compatriots.

However, Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai is the ever-uncompromising idealist, and he seeks to destroy God's world and his own people's lives and livelihood. He sees as corrupt not only the world of foreign domination by Rome, but also the unspiritual activity of ignorant

Jewish farmers—even if they are simply seeking to produce food in order to sustain human life. These farmers are working the land, and they are doing so for their own sake—not for the sake of a higher purpose. They are men trying to support their families, while Bar Yoḥai has turned his back on his own wife, who had tried to support him. The point of Rashbi's derision against Roman *tikkun olam* can no longer be understood merely as a nationalist and xenophobic response to a cruel empire; it must be seen also as a defense of a spiritualized understanding of Torah—that is, single-handed pursuit of eternal life, opposed absolutely to temporal life. It is no surprise that Rashbi is later identified as the author of the Zohar, for his mystical tendencies are already manifest in the talmudic tale. He sees the world ruled by Rome as evil—but it is not only imperial civilization that he destroys, but also simple farmers earning a living. The Torah that Rashbi studied could not have been merely the exoteric Torah filled with laws about life, about agriculture, about how to build houses and maintain roads so that the public is not harmed. Rashbi's Torah was not "study that brings one to action."

While Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai's active condemnation of the world of sowing and planting is extreme among the rabbis, his disdain for a life of economic activity—as opposed to one of study—was an attitude shared by many of the rabbis. Consider this prayer, intended to be recited upon leaving the *beit midrash*, which was composed in the generation after the Bar Kokhba revolt by Rabbi Neḥunyah ben Hakaneh:

> Rabbi Neḥunyah ben Hakaneh used to say a short prayer as he entered the *beit midrash* and as he left it….On his leaving, what did he say? "I give thanks to You, O Eternal my God, that You have set my portion with those who sit in the beit midrash and You have not set my portion with those who sit in [street] corners: for I rise early and they rise early, but I rise early for words of Torah and they rise early for temporal things; I labor and they labor, but I labor and receive a reward

> and they labor and do not receive a reward; I run and they run, but I run to the life of the world to come and they run to the pit of destruction."[36]

The cave of Shimon bar Yoḥai must have been, for him, more than just a temporary political refuge. The cave has become a sort of Garden of Eden, by virtue of Bar Yoḥai's uniquely intense Torah study. The biblical associations of the Garden include the miraculous growth of a tree and the flowing of a spring, prepared by God for humans. Leaving the cave, which is reminiscent of the original divinely planted Garden, thus represents not liberation but rather loss of purity and perfection. It is to re-enter a mundane world of material needs and economic activity—the men sowing and plowing, which so upset Bar Yoḥai. The Garden of Eden as an image of primordial existence and future otherworldliness is preferable to any world—with or without Roman rule.

The cave represents not a world of plenty and comfort, but in fact an ascetic and spare retreat center for meditation, study, and prayer. Torah is learned here at a level never to be reached in a world of distractions, even if the beauty of the body is marred by the harsh conditions. This has become the whole world, the eternal world—and for Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai and his son, that is all that is needed. Caves are also places for burying the dead in the Land of Israel, and many rabbinic tales report meetings with dead ancestors or divine beings in caves. It is in this liminal existence between life and death, between temporary existence and angelic eternal existence, that Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai had spent all those years. Here, the transcendent Torah was accessible. Here, the world of natural and supernatural were interwined. Bar Yoḥai has returned to the womb—to be nurtured by God, and then reborn as a superhuman hero. His heroism is intellectual and his learning is nourished in a womblike space—reminiscent of the popular midrashic myth about the fetus who learns the whole Torah effortlessly while in the womb.[37] But emerging from the womb and from the cave is traumatic, just as one

might be resurrected from a tomb.[38] In the midrash, the all-knowing fetus loses its Torah knowledge when expelled into the mundane world. And as we have seen, upon exiting the cave Bar Yoḥai becomes utterly destructive to the mundane world.[39]

Therefore God—the God of Creation, the God who is the greatest constructor of worlds, literally, engaged in *tikkun olam*—exiles Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai back into the cave. The cave is no longer a Garden of Eden for study, nor a political refuge from an unjust foreign ruler. It is now a penal cell. Return to the cave is a punishment reminiscent of Gehenna, where the righteous suffer in purgatory until purified after twelve months—which is the same period of time that comprises the divine sentencing for Rashbi, the hero-turned-criminal not only in the eyes of Rome, but now also in the eyes of the God whose Torah he has been studying. The God who protected and sustained Bar Yoḥai and his son miraculously in the cave with water and fruit now repudiates this radical revolutionary, who has become too radical and destructive. The voice[40] from heaven is shockingly allied with the Roman government in its concern to contain Bar Yoḥai's destructive influence on its civilizing project.

## Back to the Cave: The Turning Point for God

The turning point of our narrative is found in God's voice:

> They [i.e., Rashbi and his son] went out and they saw men plowing and sowing. They said, "They forsake eternal life (*ḥayyei olam*) and busy themselves with temporal life (*ḥayyei sha·ah*)?!" Everywhere they turned their eyes [in disapproval] was immediately burned. A heavenly voice went out and said to them, "Did you go out to destroy My world?! Return to your cave!"[41]

And we must ask ourselves: What is God's point of view on Bar Yoḥai's revolutionary actions?

Until this point in the narrative, there had been every reason to assume God is on the same side as Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai:

- The Romans destroyed God's Temple, invaded God's land, massacred God's people, and forbade the teaching of God's Torah.
- Bar Yoḥai is a persecuted political and religious refugee whose freedom of expression was undermined by an informer (or, at least, by criminally negligent gossip).
- Bar Yoḥai is a man of the *beit midrash*, the last refuge of God in the world after the destruction of God's other house, the *beit mikdash*, the Temple—and this remaining house, the *beit midrash*, is now being assaulted by Hadrian's prohibition of teaching Torah.
- The creation of the spring and the carob tree in order to feed the refugees could only have been effectuated by God.
- God must have sent Elijah to announce to Bar Yoḥai the fall of his enemy, the Emperor.
- Bar Yoḥai's ability to kill with his eyes must derive from his Torah study (not some magical formula), and must therefore be considered a divine gift.

But at this point in the story, it seems that God switches sides. God laments the destruction to "**My** world"—claiming divine ownership for the world disparaged and destroyed by Bar Yoḥai. It is no longer the eternal world of Torah that is valued as *ḥayyei olam*; rather the world that is valued is now the world of the Creator. God is thus aligned with both the Romans and the Jewish farmers, against the destructive religious anarchy of Bar Yoḥai. While God might be expected to side against Rome in support of the political or religious

plight of the people Israel, God refuses to side against the material world and humanity—and thus cannot side with the mystic/philosophic/scholar Bar Yoḥai. God does not seek to kill Bar Yoḥai as traitor or revolutionary (as Hadrian did), but simply to reeducate the arrogant rabbi, who thought he was equal to the whole world and could bear the punishment of the whole world because he was so righteous. God therefore sentences him to a further stay in the cave, as a sort of corrective punishment. The cave is no longer Paradise, but Gehenna; it is a purgatory, but not a life sentence. Bar Yoḥai's sentence is to last for twelve months. But will God's "reeducation project" succeed?

### The Second Reprieve and the Shabbat Spices

> They dwelled [in the cave] for [an additiona] twelve months. They said, "The sentence of the wicked in Hell is twelve months." A heavenly voice went out [and said], "Go out from your cave." They went out. Wherever Rabbi Eleazar smote (*maḥei*), Rashbi healed (*masei*). He said, "My son, you and I are sufficient for the world."

The inseparable father and son, the dynamic study duo, now see their paths in the world diverge: Eleazar continues the path of his uncompromising father, while Rabbi Shimon mellows and does an about-face. He heals not only the places where he has himself caused damage, but he must also clean up after the son whom he has mis-educated.[42] The crucial question to ask, is: How does the father respond to his son, who continues to destroy the world that God-the-Creator has told them not to destroy?

First, Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai takes responsibility for his son's destruction by healing whatever damage the latter effects. Perhaps the father also means to demonstrate to his son the alternative path

of creation and rebuilding that he has discovered. And Rashbi is also modeling a path of repentance and compensation, after having pursued a path of destructive judgment for many years.

Yet why does Bar Yoḥai say to this destructive son: "My son, you and I are sufficient for the world"? Doesn't this statement underscore his arrogance, as if they see themselves as two mythic titans fighting off the whole world? Maybe what Rashbi means is: we are not equal to the world in value, but we **are** sufficient in spiritual power to redeem the world—but only if we join together in healing, just as previously we joined together in learning. Bar Yoḥai thus suggests a renewed alliance between father and son: not to destroy the corrupt world, but to repair it.

The father seeks to win his son over by pointing to the spiritual beauty of simple people celebrating Shabbat. Shabbat is a taste of the world to come, a spiritual withdrawal from the mundane—just as their period of isolation in the cave had been.

> They saw a certain old man who was holding two branches of myrtle running at twilight. They said to him, "Why do you need these?" He said to them, "To honor the Sabbath." [They said:] "Would not one suffice for you?" He said, "One for [the command] Remember [the Sabbath, Exodus 20:8] and one for *Observe* [the Sabbath, Deuteronomy 5:12]." He [Rashbi] said to him [his son:] "See how dear is a commandment (*mitzvah*) to Israel!" [Their minds were set at ease.]

Melila Hellner-Eshed believes that Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai is truly transformed by the vision of the old man and the spices, though his much-scarred son remains destructive (both of himself and toward others).[43] The world of the cave contrasts markedly with the world of the old man, which so captivates Bar Yoḥai. The cave represents the intellect, while the old man worships God with a delicate and sensuous fragrance. The cave is for eternal truths enlightened in

timeless environment where there is no change of day and night and no cycle of six days of work, while the old man runs so as not to miss a fleeting moment between dusk and sundown, to honor God on Shabbat. A whiff of Shabbat is a taste of the eternal embedded in the everyday. The cave represents Bar Yoḥai's egocentric, megalomaniacal claims that he and his son are equal in value to the whole world. Yet the old man's concern to perform a single *mitzvah*—and, in fact, the practice of bringing two myrtle branches with their fine scent to honor of Shabbat is technically only a custom and not a commandment—evokes Rashbi's exuberant praise of the simple people of Israel, for their love of *mitzvot*. Thus Rashbi is on his way to becoming a healer and a supporter of civilized life. He honors a man who honors Shabbat, which is the sacred day that honors God's creation.

But Eleazar, the son of Rabbi Shimon, is permanently damaged. In the cave he was his father's only companion; there, Bar Yoḥai had the singular opportunity to create in his own image, to prove that he and his son were worth the whole world that they had denounced and left behind. Denied maternal love and even his mother's nurturing meals, Eleazar lived a life on the run from the Romans, ascetically living out his father's way of life and suffering the consequences of his father's demanding idealistic vision. Here is, perhaps, a child of a great public figure who is scarred not by neglect, but rather by the too great demands of his imposing parent. Is Eleazar another version of Isaac, bound and sacrificed by his father Abraham on the altar of his father's own religious quest? In rabbinic lore,[44] Eleazar first becomes a policeman and a brilliant detective, punishing criminals, and then an informer who hands over tax-evading Jews to the Roman authorities for execution—the same Romans who had once persecuted and pursued him and his father! His body, which once subsisted on the Spartan fare of water and carobs, becomes distended into an obesity beyond belief, and that deformity is likely to make sexual intimacy and reproduction impossible.

## The Hasidic Inspiration from Bar Yoḥai's Revelation

Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai is rebuked by God for his misguided religious worldview that denigrates and devalues the mundane activities of the farmers, but then he learns his lesson. The lesson is not simply about the need to be pragmatic in tending to the bodily needs before attending to the spiritual. Rather, it is about the importance of being engaged with the material world, as its own embodiment of spirituality. Rabbi Jacob Joseph Hakohen of Polonne (1710–1784) discovers in the tale of Bar Yoḥai's spiritual about-face a spiritual revolution congruent with the hasidic innovation of his teacher, the Baal Shem Tov. He explains:

> They [Bar Yoḥai and his son] were first of the opinion that worship of God consists solely in a person engaging in Torah [study], prayer, fasting, weeping etc. Therefore, when they saw people who were not engaged thus [i.e., the two farmers plowing their fields], they were incensed [and killed them].[45]

But God displays divine wrath, rejecting that form of service by Bar Yoḥai and leading him to reevaluate the nature of religiosity:

> They sensed that this cannot be but to instruct them of a more equitable path, the path of mercy [*raḥamim*. Namely,] that paying one's attention to the fact that in all the details of a person's occupation, there too is the blessed divine name [present], and that is considered worship of God.

Menachem Lorberbaum explains the implications of this text as follows: "Awareness of God's all-encompassing presence in the most mundane of our activities is worship of God, not only partaking in the official norms of the *halakhah*. It is 'the path of mercy' because it concomitantly entails an acceptance of the world."[46]

Rabbi Jacob Joseph continues:

> It is not only one who engages solely with Torah and prayer that is considered a worshiper of God. For by thus behaving one arouses [divine] antagonism against the people of the world who do not behave likewise. Rather, a person is considered a ladder—even when it is poised on the earth, the lowest rung is in the earthly grossness of matter.[47]

Lorberbaum explains as follows:

> Jacob's ladder is here located within each person in his quality as a microcosm, and it reaches from the highest rung on which the deity hovers to the lowest, "the earthly grossness of matter." Piety that construes the sincere occupation with the here and now as religious laxity evokes divine wrath, while acceptance inspires divine grace. *Tikkun olam* is thus transformed to a salvific stature. To quote Gershom Scholem with regard to Lurianic Kabbalah: "Salvation means actually nothing but restitution, re-integration of the original whole, or *tikkun*, to use the Hebrew term."[48]

In conclusion, the student of the Baal Shem Tov learns, from Bar Yoḥai's illumination, the lesson of Proverbs: "In all your ways know God" (Proverbs 3:6).

**A Visit to the Spa: Rest and Relaxation for the Revolutionary's Sores**

> Rabbi Pinḥas ben Yair, [Rashbi's] father-in-law, heard and went out to greet him. He took him to the bathhouse. He [Pinḥas ben Yair] was massaging his [Rashbi's] flesh. He saw that there were clefts in his flesh. He was weeping and the tears were falling from his eyes and hurting (*m'tza·ari*) him [i.e., Rashbi].

Has Rabbi Shimon mellowed? Has he repented for the crime for which God exiled him back to the cave?

Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai has certainly suffered terribly in a physical sense. The Yerushalmi's version of our story states: "Rashbi hid in a cave for thirteen years, in a cave of…carobs, until his body became covered with sores."[49] Yet in his conversation with his empathetic father-in-law,[50] Bar Yoḥai shows no bitterness—as he had earlier evinced toward both Rome and the farmers. His own suffering and the lost years in the cave do not fuel his indignation; his idealism is not tainted with personal vengeance in this case. But his mellow response is not necessarily derived from a change of perspective concerning the material world. Rather, he continues to downgrade the physical and to justify suffering as a necessary means to greater Torah learning, demonstrated by his prowess in fending off intellectual challenges. Bar Yoḥai is as sharp as ever in mind, and so the loss of his skin's beauty and the pain when the salty tears drop into his cracked skin is not of real consequence.

Yet something must have changed. Rabbi Shimon Bar Yoḥai, who had condemned the bathhouses of Rome as places to pamper one's body, is himself now in a bathhouse—his own convalescent resort, as it were. Bar Yoḥai allows his father-in-law to pamper him, even if he denies his need for healing. Years earlier, he had shown no appreciation of his wife's concern for his physical well-being and, in fact, he had disdained any dependence on others; now, however, he accepts graciously that kind of loving physical care from his father-in-law.

## Back to the Material World: The Turning Point for Bar Yoḥai

> He [Rashbi] said, "Since a miracle occurred, I will go and fix (*atkin*) something, since it says, 'And Jacob came whole (*shaleim*)' (Genesis 33:18)."

Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai's healing process is also reinforced by his sense of gratitude for having been saved from Roman persecution. Life is important to him after all, even in the mundane sense. Bar Yoḥai now celebrates life and enjoys a good bath—even though the bathhouses were built by Rome. So as one who thanks God for the gift of divine grace in saving one's life, Bar Yoḥai goes beyond recognition in words and now wants to repay his community for their kindness to him. Recalling Jacob's near-death experience upon returning from twenty years of exile and meeting Esau—the father of Edom, the ancestor of Rome in rabbinic midrashic genealogy—Bar Yoḥai too wishes to thank God for maintaining his wholeness.[51]

What does Bar Yoḥai learn from Jacob, who also fought a life-long struggle and found rest only after twenty years? Let us begin with the literal meaning of the Torah, and then see how the rabbis read it—integrating into our cave story notions of *t'shuvah* and *tikkun*, repentance and reparation. The Torah relates:

> Jacob arrived whole in the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan—having come thus from Paddan-aram—and he encamped (*va-yiḥan*) before the city. The parcel of land where he pitched his tent he purchased from the children of Ḥamor, Shechem's father, for a hundred *kesitahs* (coins). He set up an altar there, and called it *El Elohei Yisrael*. (Genesis 33:18–20)

Jacob arrived "complete" (*shaleim*), which means he did not lose his life, his wealth, his children; he was, however, limping, so his wholeness stands in tension with the injury sustained in his struggle with the angel (of Esau?). Finished running, he now settles down in Shechem, a city, and purchases a piece of land—his first permanent home. He then builds an altar to his God, named by his own new name, "Israel." The altar is built from a sense of gratitude, for Jacob is aware of how far he has come and how God has answered the prayer he made before meeting Esau.[52] Since the Hebrew verbs for "to camp" and "to placate" sound very similar, the word va-yiḥan, which

literally means "camped," can also be reinterpreted midrashically to mean that Jacob "placated the face" of the city fathers, from whom he bought the land (Genesis 33:19). Similarly, Jacob placated Esau with material gifts (Genesis 33:8).[53] Perhaps he also requested a permit of domicile as a resident alien, as Abraham did in Hebron when he purchased a burial cave and a field (Genesis 23:4).

The rabbis' explanation of this verse transforms it from simply a financial transaction, conducted by a nomad settling on land outside a city, into an act of beneficence for the city that resonates with the notion of classic Hellenistic philanthropic contributions to public institutions. But they have also shaped the gift in the form of the fulfillment of a vow in gratitude for being rescued:

> He [Rashbi] said, "Since a miracle occurred, I will go and fix (*atkin*) something, since it says, 'And Jacob came whole (*shaleim*)' (Genesis 33:18)."
> Rav [who explicated that same verse] said, "Whole in his body, whole in his money, whole in his Torah, as the verse says: 'and he [Jacob] showed grace to (*va-yiḥan*; literally, "camped before") the city, and Jacob fixed (*va-yiken*; literally "purchased") a field...(Genesis 33:18).'"
> Rav said, "He established (*tikkein*) coinage for them."
> Samuel said, "He established (*tikkein*) markets for them."
> Rabbi Yoḥanan said, "He established (tikkein) bathhouses for them."

For Rav, "whole in his Torah" means that Jacob has not lost his Torah learning during his long exile. This is fitting as well for Bar Yoḥai, who has grown in his own Torah learning in the harsh conditions of his own long exile, in the cave. But Rav gives pride of place to physical blessings ("whole in his body, whole in his wealth") before even commenting on spiritual blessings ("whole in his Torah").

In corresponding measure to the physical and financial blessings he has received, Jacob shows his gratitude not to God nor to Esau,

but to the non-Jewish population of this polis.[54] The nomadic shepherd turns out to be an activist for urban development with a fine sense for markets and coinage. In short, Jacob embodies the great world-civilizing impulses of Greece and Rome in his *tikkun*, his development and his repair of public space.

How can Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai follow this model? Only by making amends, by repairing all the damage he has done, and by reversing his whole revolutionary ideology. Torah itself will now become a means to bring about reconstructive action; it can no longer be an idealistic stance from which to disparage the world of civilization.

Literarily, the same words are invoked at both the beginning and ending of the story of Bar Yoḥai, so that we as readers can measure the changes in him, word for word. Repeated are key terms: baths, markets, and the money collected at toll-bridges. All of these are for our own good, for our own physical benefit, for society—and they are precisely the elements that Bar Yoḥai had originally condemned, by declaring: "Everything they established (*tiknu*), they established only for their own needs: They established markets—to place prostitutes there; bathhouses—to pamper themselves; bridges—to take tolls." The root of the most frequently repeated word in the narrative is *tav-kof-nun*, which means "repaired" or "constructed" or "instituted"; and the world to be improved is not the eternal one of Torah-study, *ḥayyei olam*, but rather the social–material one, *ḥayyei sha·ah*. Jacob's *va-yiken*—purchase of land—resonates with this root as well, and so perhaps his action is also being reinterpreted as *tikkun*.

The danger of *tikkun olam* is that may provide a temptation to destroy the established world before building a new one. In the lyrics of the socialist anthem "Internationale," translated into Russian by the Jewish poet Arkady Yakovlevich Kots in 1902 and later translated into Hebrew by members of the Labor Movement in Israel, the workers speak of destroying the foundations of the world in order to build on its ruins a new world:

> Arise, you branded by a curse, you whole world of the starving and enslaved! Our indignant intellect boils, ready to lead us into a fight to the death. **We will destroy this world of violence down to the foundations, and then we will build our new world.** He who was nothing will become everything!

This is close to the spirit of Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai at the beginning of the tale. Roman rule is described with the term *tiknu*, in terms of the civilization they have established. And that is precisely what Bar Yoḥai wishes to destroy: he wishes to do a *tikkun* of the divine kingdom. As used in the fourth-century Aleinu prayer, this language speaks to calling all the inhabitants of the world to bend their knee to God, destroying all idolatry and the earthly rule of all that is inimical to the sovereignty of God. However, at the end of the tale, Bar Yoḥai has changed: he not only abandons his earlier commitment to a completely destructive tikkun of the prevailing social order, but he even expresses a desire to join in an effort to do a piecemeal *tikkun* that accommodates human life in its wholly mundane search for the amenities of civilization. He no longer seeks thoroughgoing revolution requiring the dismantling of all of civilization—even though Roman urban civilization is also implicated in the suppression of Torah study and of his people's desire for freedom.

## *Tikkun Olam*: Urban Renewal and Its Detractors

Let us return to the opening question in this essay: Is there necessarily an opposition between *talmud torah* and *ma·aseh*, between study and action? At the end of the tale, Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai asks, hoping to be helpful: "Is there something to fix (*l'takkonei*)?" In posing this question, is he following in Jacob's footsteps and going to work in the city engineering department; or does he mean to suggest that there

may be some way in which Torah can bring about action to effect improvement of civil society? The answer is: he is doing both. Bar Yoḥai marks off a hard path for priests to walk though the graveyeard without becoming ritually contaminated. Death is the primary source of impurity in the Torah, and Bar Yoḥai is now committed to life—to everyday life, to making things more comfortable for our physical existence. To this end, he will seek to help the priests maintain their purity, as rabbinic law mandates, even though the Temple is long gone. He wants to save them the bother of a long walk around the field of suspected impurity, and he does so by identifying where precisely bodies were most likely buried (i.e., where the soil is still loose), thus permiting them to walk on the hard-packed earth.

Melila Hellner-Eshed notes quizzically that this *tikkun* of Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai's merely provided a shortcut for a minority of the residents, as it saved the priests the inconvenience walking around the suspected old cemetery area.[55] But surely Tiberias—the largest Jewish city left, after the destruction of all southern Judea in the Bar Kokhba revolt—had more pressing needs than a shortcut for priests! Even Jacob innovated much more practical projects for Shechem, as did the Roman builders for all of the Land of Israel. Why was Bar Yoḥai's effort at *tikkun* so circumscribed?

Perhaps we ought to see Bar Yoḥai's most important contribution as keeping alive the Oral Torah, which was almost lost after the revolt. His tikkun in the urban realm can be seen as a part of the self-corrective mechanisms of the rabbinic system. My teacher David Hartman often spoke of the "pathology" of the *halakhah*—that is, the ways that legalism and intellectual elitism can create unhealthy forms of service of God. The fear of suspected impurity, and the resulting interference of religious strictness in daily life, are pathologies that must be put in their place by greater and more flexible knowledge, and the ultra-conservative religious fanatics must be silenced. Bar Yoḥai's apparent leniency with the law of impurity for the sake of greater ease in daily life invited zealots to denounce him and tear

down what he had tried to fix. For those opposed to Bar Yoḥai, the purity of death took precedence over the sanctity of life:

> A certain old man said, "The son of Yoḥai made a cemetery pure [i.e., he tried to what is conceptually impossible and hence hypocritical, since by definition no cemetery can be pure of the impurity of death]."

This detractor, who was spreading ugly innuendoes and gossip (the larger topic of this talmudic section), turns out to have been part of the very *beit din* (court) in which Bar Yoḥai ruled that priests were permitted free passage through the carefully marked field. The old man has thus betrayed the collegial loyalty among judges. In condemning the traitorous old judge, Rashbi compares him unfavorably to the professional ethos of prostitutes, who loyally help each other dress up and apply cosmetics, acting with more solidarity and cooperation among themselves than the judge himself does among his own colleagues. In effect Bar Yoḥai, has corrected his pejorative comments about prostitutes, whom he had associated initially with hedonist Roman urban culture that he condemned, and he has instead criticized the kind of supercritical rabbinic scholar that he himself may have been, at one time.

## Epilogue: Payback Time

> He [Rashbi] went out to the market. He saw Judah ben Gerim. [He said,] "Is this one still in the world?" He set his eyes upon him and made him a heap of bones.

Note that Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai has now been domesticated almost completely—he is no longer a critic of civilization, but now one of its promoters; no longer an otherworldly Torah scholar, but

now a world-repairing scholar who uses his legal wisdom to make life easier for priests going to market. He heals rather than damages; he feels gratitude rather than disdain for the material world and his own body.

However, he has *not* become a milquetoast, a *nebbishy* peacenik, and neither is he seen as the lover of peace always seeking compromise, celebrated by Hillel's understanding of Aaron the priest. Bar Yoḥai still uses his charismatic powers to punish extra-legally, in a vigilante way. He does kill the seditious fellow judge, who had undermined Rashbi's ruling by taking part in the court yet refuting its conclusions publicly. That is a very radical punishment, which is unjustifiable and disproportionate in legal terms; but psychologically and literarily, as revenge for betrayal, it is very satisfying. Bar Yoḥai may have seen in that super-pious judge an image of his own former self, as a zealot of uncompromising truth. In killing the judge, he perhaps kills an aspect of himself. The process of self-transformation requires expulsion of the old self.

Yet ironically, this shows that Bar Yoḥai's extremism has not been eradicated but simply redirected. He kills Judah ben Gerim for being a traitorous informer (or, at least, for being a loose-lipped gossip), whose revelation of Rashbi's private comments caused the latter years of persecution.[56]

Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai believes that forms of worldly corruption can be eradicated, and so he acts decisively to remove two traitors who threatened him personally—but he does not condemn the whole world. Bar Yoḥai is still militant, but now he maintains solidarity with simple people and with urban society. He has modified his attitude toward human civilization and changed into a piecemeal reformer. His changing conception of the good and how to achieve it contributes to a new way of imagining the human pursuit of social good: "The philanthropic tradition is the social history of the moral imagination—imagining a vision of the public good and inventing forms of voluntary action to advance that good."[57]

The starting point is imagining "the good" in the Platonic tradition. Bar Yoḥai in the cave has an individual's good in mind—a contemplative one, also an idea central to Plato—which he believes is diametrically opposed to the world empire that rules the public sphere (namely: Rome). He imagines his own personal spiritual good as an ideal that exists in opposition to an existing reality and independent of any physical needs, which are met supernaturally while he is in hiding. He communes through God and Torah with this otherworldly, private good for twelve years in the cave. However, when he emerges—after an additional thirteenth year, meted out as a type of divine punishment—he is changed: now, Bar Yoḥai embraces a "public good" that is achieved not by study or asceticism but by legal activism on the municipal level. His goal is simple: to improve the material and social life in the polis, so that priests can more conveniently traverse public space. This concern for others makes his imagination "moral," while his legal activity is "a voluntary action to advance that good."[58] Biblical, rabbinic, and governmental legislation all show that the "vision of public good" can be achieved by judicial action. Moral imagination, nurtured by the prophets and the philosophers, helps us to imagine a world better than the one we have—and we can then invent ways to make repairs in a flawed world.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai, then, arrives—through his own path of self-transformation and *tikkun*—at a view expressed beautifully by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik:

> We have always considered ourselves to be an inseparable part of humanity and we were ever ready to accept the divine challenge, "Fill the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28). We have never proclaimed the philosophy of *contemptus* or *odium seculi* [rejection of the secular world]. We have steadily maintained that involvement in the creative scheme of things is mandatory.[59]

> Men of old who could not fight disease and succumbed in multitudes to yellow fever or any other plague with degrading helplessness could not lay claim to dignity. Only the man who builds hospitals, discovers therapeutic techniques, and saves lives is blessed with dignity.…The brute is helpless, and therefore not dignified. Civilized man has gained limited control of nature and has become in certain respects her master, and with his mastery he has attained dignity as well. His mastery has made it possible for him to act in accordance with his responsibility.[60]

> When God created the world, God provided an opportunity for the work of God's hands—man—to participate in God's creation. The Creator, as it were, impaired reality in order that mortal man could repair its flaws and perfect it.[61]

Here we have completed our narrative, which is best described as a reluctant journey toward *t'shuvah*, repentance, or to *tikkun*, repair. It is Rashbi's attitude to the world, even more than the world itself, that is fixed. This is what Maimonides calls *tikkun ha-nefesh*, repairing the soul, the character, the mind, and beliefs—and which he says is even more important than repairing the body, *tikkun ha-guf*.[62] In it, Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai's legendary reputation as a mystic revolutionary undergoes a radical facelift. He is remolded from a militant, anti-worldly monk to an urban reformer concerned with micro-planning in order to improve accessibility, by permitting a path through the graveyards for the comfort of the priests. He is no longer an ivory-tower or cave-dwelling academic, but rather a legal activist seeking compromise in the real world.

Our task is now complete, as we sought to illuminate the idea of *tikkun olam* from an *aggadah* that probably has no historical claim to authenticity. It goes against everything the other rabbinic sources teach us about Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai. But that is the point: *tikkun olam* is an approach that differs from other attempts to make a better

world (with which it should be not confused), by adopting an attitude of total transformation. It comes to replace revolution with reform. It lowers expectations and therefore allows for compromises. It is not apocalyptic, even when its enemy is no less globalized and all-powerful than the Roman Empire. The master of *tikkun olam* must cultivate particular virtues and dispositions. While young rebels may be moved to action in very extremist ways, they must mature in their labor for justice and learn to tame their self-righteous, arrogant, and destructive passions—such as the ones that Bar Yoḥai "fixed" in himself. Fixing the world must never lose its love and high valuation of God's creation. Otherwise, the would-be purists of universal justice must be sent back to the cave for another "time-out."

## NOTES

[1] Also known as the Mitteler Rebbe (1773–1827), who became the second Lubavitcher Rebbe.
[2] Reb Shneuer Zalman of Lyadi (1745–1812), the first Lubavitcher Rebbe.
[3] Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World* (New York: Schocken, 2007), p. 82.
[4] The term as it appears in classical sources includes the definite article, *tikkun ha-olam*. In modern parlance, the article is elided and the concept is referred to simply as *tikkun olam*.
[5] Translation adapted from Jeffrey Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), pp. 106–108, based on ms. Munich 95.
[6] The identity of the speakers is uncertain; perhaps this is an anonymous editorial insertion.
[7] I use "Hell" and "Gehenna" interchangeably in this essay.
[8] Apparently as a result of Rashbi's time in the cave, he now surpassed Pinḥas ben Yair, who had once been a more brilliant scholar than Rashbi.
[9] Rabbi Judah Loew ben Betzalel of Prague (c. 1520–1609, called the Maharal) suggests that Jacob's "fixing the face of the city" may refer to the face on the coins of the city.
[10] Lupine beans are a typical Mediterranean plant with a bitter taste, used mainly for animal fodder. Thus Ben Zakkai must have regarded at least part of this field as pure; otherwise he could not have harvested lupines to be given to the priest as a *t'rumah* offering. Some say Ben Zakkai was himself a priest; if so, he would not have entered the field if it was impure.
[11] Since a human corpse is the the greatest possible source of ritual impurity, a cemetery can never validly be declared pure. The old man implied that while Rashbi may have thought that he was only marking off a few suspected graves, he could not, in fact, turn that which is essentially impure into a wholly pure area.
[12] In other words, Rashbi accuses the old man of not even showing the minimal solidarity with his colleagues and fellow judges that would have been shown even by competitive prostitutes—rather, he publicly attacked the joint ruling of the other rabbis.
[13] B. Kiddushin 40b.
[14] Ibid.
[15] The passage is found in B. Sukkah 45b, following the translation of Jeffrey Rubenstein in *Talmudic Stories*, p. 117. Elsewhere, Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai is reported to have said, "Learn my principles, for my principles are loftier than [my teacher] Rabbi Akiva's highest principles" (B. Gittin 67a).
[16] B. Shabbat 33b.
[17] Ibid.
[18] B. Berakhot 35b.
[19] Y. Taanit 4:8 (68d). Akiva expounded the following verse, "A star (*kokhav*) has

risen from Jacob" (Numbers 24:17) and so nicknamed the rebel as *Kokhba*, "the star," rather than *Koziba*. Upon seeing Bar Kokhba, Akiva would say: "This is the King Messiah!".

[20] B. Berakhot 64b.

[21] Henri Irénée Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, trans. George Lamb (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956), p. 413.

[22] Ibid., p. 392. Marrou observes that Rome's senatorial class of aristocrats saw their empire as "fulfilling its historic mission to preserve civilization and culture in the face of the barbarians; and their culture came more and more to mean the classical literary tradition." The Italians who conquered Greece in the second century B.C.E. had since absorbed its language and culture and the elite now spoke, read, and educated their children in Greek alongside Latin. By virtue of the *pax Romana*, Rome was able to turn the Mediterranean world into one cultural community. While some oppressed Judeans might see the Romans only through the eyes of their sword and their taxes, others—like Rabbi Judah, son of the converts—might concur with one Greek aristocrat Aelius Aristides in Ionia, who addressed the Roman emperor extolling the philosophic benefits of the Empire's law and order: "The whole world seems to be on holiday. It has laid aside garments of iron so that it shall be free to devote itself entirely to beauty and the joy of living. The cities have forgotten their old rivalries—or rather the same spirit of emulation animates them all, the desire to be considered first in beauty and charm. On all sides can be seen gymnasiums, fountains, *propylaea*, temples, workshops, schools." (Arstd. XXVI, K, 97).

[23] Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, p. 110.

[24] This point was made in a lecture at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem given to their annual rabbinic seminar; the source is M. Gittin 4:5.

[25] Martin Cohen points out that *geirim* may not mean "converts" here, but simply "resident aliens." He notes correctly that it is a violation of rabbinic ethics to remind descendants of converts of their ancestors (B. Baba Metzia 58b). Nevertheless, in this rabbinic narrative that profiles the generally xenophobic Bar Yoḥai, it is not inappropriate to identify Bar Yoḥai's rival in a way that may suggest a slur on his foreign lineage.

[26] The motif of the threesome who speak out on the imperial program of an evil emperor who is suppressing the Jewish people is echoed in a midrash about the three wise men who advise Pharaoh about his decree to kill the Jewish babies in Egypt (Shemot Rabbah 1:9). The advisors in that source are identified as Balaam, Job, and Jethro. Job is the silent one there, but his silence is not neutral or excusable—he was later punished with great suffering. The midrash sees God as parallel to the Romans, in issuing decrees against those who remain silent. In Egypt, maintaining silence enabled the Pharaoh to carry out his decrees against the Israelites. In light of this comparison, Rashbi is to be praised as a moral hero, not condemned as an arrogant intellectual who was secretly jealous of Roman achievements.

[27] M. Kiddushin 1:10.

[28] Rashbi's food in the cave is supplied miraculously, just as God provided manna from heaven for the Israelites in the desert. However, the analogy does not extend to clothing: unlike the Israelites' clothing, which did not wear out (Deuteronomy 8:3–4), care is needed to be taken to preserve Rashbi's clothing.
[29] B. Niddah 30b.
[30] Y. Berakhot 1:3 (3b).
[31] The heavenly *beit midrash* is where the righteous join God in study of the Torah (*Tanna D'vei Eliyahu Rabbah* 1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9): "One who accustoms oneself to go to the *beit ha-k'neset* and *beit ha-midrash* in this world shall also be admitted into the beit ha-kneset and beit ha-midrash of the world to come, as it is written, 'Happy are they who dwell in Your house; they shall [in the future as well] sing Your praise (Psalm 84:5).'" This statement is attributed to Joshua ben Levi in Devarim Rabbah 7:1, cf. also Midrash Tehillim 84:3 to Psalm 84:5.
[32] Midrashic wordplay highlights these thematically related terms; note, for example, the assonance between the Aramaic terms for plow (*karvi*) and bread (*krakhi*).
[33] Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories*, pp. 112–113.
[34] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Young, 1951), pp. 38–39 and 45.
[35] Initially the cave is a shelter from political persecution, just as David's cave in Ein Gedi was his safe haven from King Saul who sought to kill him (1 Samuel 23–24). Caves in the Land of Israel were often used during revolts, as places of refuge in the Roman period. The Dead Sea Scrolls and many other documents from this era have been found in caves, where the refugees from the Romans found temporary relief. In the Yerushalmi's version of our story (at Y. Sheviit 9:1, [38d]), the cave is only a place to hide; emergence from the cave is seen as analogous to the liberation of a bird from imprisonment. Nothing therefore of the life in the cave is retold.
[36] B. Berakhot 28b.
[37] B. Niddah 30b.
[38] To Martin S. Cohen, the senior editor of this volume, I owe the observation that *kever*, grave, is also a metaphor for womb (M. Ohalot 7:4).
[39] In the version of the tale as preserved in the Babylonian Talmud; cf. note 34 above for how the Yerushalmi treats the element of the cave differently.
[40] The voice of heaven in the Babylonian version may be contrasted with the "voice in the world," the rumors about Roman persecution that Bar Yoḥai sought to consult before daring to leave the refuge, in the Yerushalmi's version of the tale.
[41] While God is willing to forgo divine honor in order to bring peace in the world, Rashbi is not. Consider the following text (B. Nedarim 66b): Once a husband told his wife [who had burned his food]: "I swear that you may not benefit from me [sexually or materially, through my legal obligation to support my wife] until you make Rabbi Judah and Rabbi Shimon taste this dish [that you burned]." Rabbi Judah tasted it [to release her from her husband's vow].

He explained: "My behavior can be learned logically by *kal va-ḥomer* [from God], for the Torah commands that in order to bring peace between a husband and wife [in the case of the woman suspected by her husband of committing adultery, they may be united if she drinks] the accursed water into which My name that has been written in sanctity has been dissolved. So too for me, even more so [I who am far lower than God must agree to forfeit my honor and to eat this burned dish]!" But Rabbi Shimon refused to eat it. He said: "May all the sons of widows die, and yet Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai will not budge from this position, so that people will not treat vows lightly."

[42] This contrast is highlighted by the use of similar-sounding Aramaic verbs: *maḥei/masei* = destroy/heal.

[43] Hellner-Eshed made this point this in a lecture at the annual rabbinic seminar at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem.

[44] B. Bava Metzia 83b-84b.

[45] Jacob Joseph Hakohen, *Toldot Yaakov Yosef* (ed. Koretz, 1780), *Va-yeitzei*, p. 27a. *Toldot Yaakov Yosef* is the earliest published version of the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov. Translations of Hebrew originals in this essay are taken from Menachem Lorberbaum's unpublished work, *Rethinking Halakhah in Modern Eastern Europe: Mysticism, Antinomianism, Positivism*.

[46] Lorberbaum, *Rethinking Halakhah*.

[47] *Toldot Yaakov Yosef, Va-yeitzei*, p. 27b.

[48] Lorberbaum, *Rethinking Halakhah*. The Scholem quotation comes from his *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1941; rpt. New York: Schocken, 1978), p. 268.

[49] Y. Sheviit 9:1 (38d).

[50] See B. Sotah 49a: "Pinḥas ben Yair said: 'Since the destruction of the Temple, scholars of Torah (*ḥaveirim*) and people of pedigree are shamed and cover their heads; men of good deeds have diminished, while men of violence and the informers (*baalei lashon*) have increased…So on whom may we rely? On our Parent in Heaven."

[51] In the Yerushalmi's version (Sheviit 9:1 [38d]), Bar Yoḥai realizes how easy it is to catch a fugitive hiding in a cave and how God must have decreed his untouchability: "At the end of thirteen years, he [Rashbi] said: 'Perhaps I shall go out and see what is happening in the world.' He went out and sat at the mouth of the cave, where he saw a hunter tracking birds and spreading his net. He heard a heavenly voice saying, 'You are dismissed'— and it [the bird] escaped. He said, 'Without [the decree of] heaven, [even] a bird does not perish; so much more so a human being!' When he saw that things had quieted down, he said: 'Let us go down and bathe (literally, 'warm ourselves) at the baths of Tiberias.' He said: 'We ought to fix something (*takkana*), as our ancestors of old have done.'"

[52] See Genesis 32:10–13: "Then Jacob said: 'O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac…Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; else, I fear, he may come and strike me down, mothers and children alike.'"

[53] Martin S. Cohen notes that the same word, spelled the same way, can also mean "to respond with grace or mercy to one who placates" (cf., e.g., 2 Kings 13:23).
[54] In the rabbis' day, the city of Shechem—Neapolis, today called by the Arabs Nablus—was a thriving Greek town.
[55] See note 42 above.
[56] Recall that Judah related to his non-Jewish parents the conversation among the three rabbis about the Romans, passing along not only the participants' positions but also their names—and that information made its way to the Roman authorities, either intentionally or unintentionally. It was in the era of Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai that the rabbis added to the daily Amidah prayer a request that God curse informers (*la-malshinim al t'hi tikvah*).
[57] Robert Payton and Michael Moody, *Understanding Philanthropy: Its Meaning and Mission* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univerity Press, 2008), p. 154.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Confrontation," in *Tradition* 6:2 (1964), part II, no. 2, p.20.
[60] Joseph Soloveitchik, "The Lonely Man of Faith," in *Tradition* 7:2 (1965), p.16.
[61] Joseph Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1984), p. 101.
[62] *Guide for the Perplexed* III 27.