

The Elie Wiesel Living Archive Handout/Lesson #3: Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai Revisited

a) EW:

"What matters to me is that for many generations, the Zohar has been attributed to [Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai], and I want to know why. Why was he chosen? Why is his name revered in kabbalah more than any other Talmudic master?"

"In other words, what was it in his personality, in his temperament, in his life pattern, that made him in the eyes of tradition, in the fantasy of hundreds and thousands of Jews, into the mystical leader, the mystical authority, the mystical man par excellence?"

b) B. Talmud Shabbat 33b:7

They emerged from the cave, and **saw people who were plowing and sowing**. Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai **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**.

c) EW: Autobiography

Of course, we understand [Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Eleazar]. There were times, in 1945, when Jewish men and women came out of the darkness, and they realized that while they had been there, the world was going on, [01:01:00] with weddings, Bar Mitzvah celebrations, and card games, and movies, and theater. I think what they felt is what we know that Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Eleazar felt.

d) B. Talmud Shabbat 33b

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.**

e)EW: The Ethics of Suffering

But therein lay the greatness of Rabbi Shimon. He had to go beyond suffering, for the last year was probably the hardest. When you read the literature of the Soviet dissidents -- great literature, mind you -- you know that all of them will tell you that the first time to be in jail was not so terrible. But then, when they had to go back to jail, that was more terrible.

f) The hardest year, therefore, for Rabbi Shimon and his son was the last year. Had he remained angry and bitter to the end, he would have been remembered in awe, not in love, and surely not by mystical legend [01:02:00] as a saintly figure whose compassion had mystical, messianic connotations. The last year, I believe, made Rabbi Shimon a different man. It was a year beyond: beyond suffering, beyond fear, beyond solitude. For I still believe that according to the Jewish tradition, which is mine and ours, suffering confers no privilege on anyone. Everything depends on what one does with it. If suffering leads to revenge, and resentment, and destruction, it is doomed to sterility. If it becomes an opening towards our fellow man, then it may turn into strength, and it may invite us to discoveries of grace and beauty.