

Emergence

At a time of terror, the great 2nd Century sage Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son Rabbi Elazar retreat into a cave. For 12 years they sit, sequestered away, studying the secrets of Torah and some say even discovering the mystic truths of Kabbalah. Finally, they emerge from the cave. Holding clarity over the truths they gleaned underground, Shimon and Elazar gaze about the world and see humanity engaged in behaviors, virtues, values not their own. They become enraged, reading such difference as abomination. With the power of their enlightened state and their own felt-truth, their eyes actually incinerate everyone upon whom they gaze in judgement. Horrified, God says, "After so much learning, you emerge only to destroy my world? Return to the cave." For twelve months, they sit once more in the confines of the cavern. When they emerge again, Elazar continues to destroy, but Shimon decides to change. And commits instead to healing the world.¹

There is remarkable parallelism between Plato's allegory of the cave and tale of Shimon and Elazar. They are stories about the acquisition of deeper truths amidst the backdrop of a cave, and the struggle for the person possessing such truth to exist with others. But some scholars believe the Talmud is actually attempting to challenge Greek philosophy.² For Plato, the ideal is truth, and the enlightened person must suffer living alongside the ignorance of humanity in darkened caves. For Shimon, he comes to realize that ultimately truth is meant to live in the world in a way that heals and brings it together.

For many of us, this year has been one of both retreat and emergence. Some of us have found both comfort and enlightenment sequestered away in safe havens. Others have stood on the front lines in hospitals and offices, struggling with the reality of humanity. Some of us took up baking or career pivots; others grieved alone or suffered in solitude. We look back to life two years ago, and nearly everything has changed. As we emerge from our caves, the question will be how we gaze upon the world around us. Do we follow Elazar, holding newfound clarity, wielding truth through eyes of judgement, and seeking to incinerate those walking a different path from our own? Do we follow Shimon, finding virtue both in the changing of the world, and in our own capacity to change? While the story of Shimon and Elazar, and the story of today, may be read in myriad ways, one clear trope rings through every reading: change is inevitable. The question is our response to it.

The trouble is, we aren't wired for change. When it comes to the idea that we are wrong, or not entirely right, or that the change needed isn't of the world but rather ourselves, we are incredibly adept at resisting. Adam Grant from University of Pennsylvania writes that we possess an astonishing array of cognitive biases telling us, *You are right—disregard all evidence to the contrary*. "These biases are like a crocodile-filled moat around the fortress of our beliefs. They turn us into hermit kings, convinced that any counterarguments that break

¹ Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 33b

² Charlotte E. Fonrobert, "Plato in Rabbi Shimeon bar Yohai's Cave: the Talmudic Inversion of Plato's Politics of Philosophy," *AJS Review* 31 (2007), pp. 277-96.

through our walls will bring us misery.”³ Orthodoxy, whether of religion, economics, or politics – is defined by holding fast to the truths of prior generations. From its Greek root, any form of orthodoxy believes it has achieved its truth, and commits not to change. I cannot imagine a less Jewish worldview than orthodoxy, nor a time of greater urgency for sacred *unorthodoxy*.⁴

Lest this sound like the flaming of denominational war, we may find as much orthodoxy in our Reform movement as in the Orthodox movement. Rigidity of mind and heart may occur irrespective of garb or religious affiliation. As one who used to wear a black hat and suit and identified as Orthodox, some of my most unorthodox teachers have come from communities far different than ours. Sacrificing integrity on the altar of constancy, remaining rigid in an ever-changing world, these are the plagues that may be found in any movement, any political party, within religion and science alike. Orthodoxy would have doomed Judaism to demise with the destruction of the Temple, and orthodoxy is mightier even than ignorance in stopping the tide of 21st Century learning. Our most treasured practices and beliefs, from the Passover seder to the notion of prayer to even the concept of a synagogue, are all the products of being radically *unorthodox*.

When did changing one’s mind become a sign of ineptitude and weakness rather than an indicator of growth? When did we come to venerate the ideology of “either you’re with me in all ways or opposed to me in every way?” When did we lose compromise as a virtue, debate as opportunity, and ideological diversity as the way of wisdom? For ours is a tradition that imagines God as One who learns, who makes mistakes, who regrets, who changes One’s mind. Our Torah pictures God with wrathful clarity, ready to raze entire cities to the ground, but Abraham was able to bring nuance to God’s rage against sinners. Convinced of the Israelites’ worthlessness, God readies to destroy the nation, but Moses instructs God on a different path. Our sages even imagine the moon in the sky points out God’s own missteps, and that God offers atonement and chooses to walk a different path – that, like us on this Yom Kippur, God is trying to change and grow.⁵ And indeed, our early rabbis treasured their study partners with whom they most vehemently disagreed, for they illumined the way of wisdom.⁶ When describing the essence of Judaism, our rabbis posit the image of a nimble plant able to grow out of the rigidity of rock and barren earth.⁷

Elsewhere in the Talmud, the story of Elazar continues. We find him deepening his studies and expanding his erudition. Riding atop a donkey, he finds joy knowing he possesses intellectual clarity achieved by few. He happens upon a person he deems lowly and proceeds to castigate the stranger for his lowliness. Seeing the damage of his insults, Elazar descends from his donkey and follows the stranger until he finds forgiveness. Finally, Elazar learns the wisdom of his father Shimon – truth may be a blade of destruction if wielded without humanity. Rabbi Elazar then immediately enters a study hall and teaches, “A person should always be supple like a reed and not rigid like a cedar.’ And therefore, it is taught, the

³ Arthur C. Brooks, “Changing Your Mind Can Make You Less Anxious,” The Atlantic (Atlantic Media Company, March 11, 2021)

⁴ With gratitude to Deborah Feldman for her memoir *Unorthodox* and a source of inspiration for this frame of unorthodoxy.

⁵ Chullin 60b

⁶ Bava Metzia 84a

⁷ Exodus Rabbah 1:12

reed and the quill merit the place of being the pliable instrument with which we scribe our Torah and the *mezuzot* on our doorposts.”⁸ The capacity to adapt is literally the way we write our tradition. The truth of our Torah begins from our willingness to bend.

We stand at the threshold of the 180th year of our congregation. Over this time, the generations before us shifted from Orthodox to Conservative to Reform movements, evolving the CRS philosophies and practices to match the needs of our people. We moved from the lower east side to the upper east side and finally to the upper west side, as we centered our place of belonging in the heart of our community. Our attitudes about Hebrew, the land of Israel, the place of people based on gender, sexuality, physical and mental faculty changed. Our melodies, our fashion, even our challah ingredients evolved. We remain anchored in a steadfast, millennia-old tradition: we are proudly a bastion of unorthodox Judaism, modeling for us and for the world how we grow through difference, how we thrive through adaptation, how we hold truth as a vehicle to bring us together and heal.

As we embark on this new chapter of Rodeph Sholom, we proudly open wider our doors of belonging, to see diversity in all its forms as our most precious of blessings, and our capacity to grow our greatest of gifts. In the months ahead, we will expand our pathways of learning and deepen our conversations of complexity, listening and evolving with the wisdom of the world.

We are urged to leave our caves of comfort and gather with others, enmeshed in a larger world. In this state, we surely find the full range of humanity, and encounter values and priorities not our own. As proven by the generations before us, we will be made all the wiser for it. The Divine Voice calls to us, “Emerge from your cave.”

⁸ Taanit 20b