

THINK #1 – The Talmud's Tales Of Teshuva
Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai and Plato – A Story Of Two Caves

אמר רבי חנינא: חותמו של הקדוש ברוך הוא אמת

Rabbi Hanina said: the seal of the Holy One, Blessed be He, is truth (Shabbat 55a)

By Way Of Introduction:

Two and a half thousand years ago the Greek philosopher, Plato, told a story of people trapped inside a cave in which they can only make out the shadows. One person escapes from the cave and makes it out into the bright sunlight outside and discovers that what all of the people he knows take to be truth – is in fact only a distortion of reality. Hundreds of years later the Talmud told the story of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai who flees from the Romans, leaves behind material life, and spends thirteen years in a cave with his son, buried up to their necks in sand, where they discover the eternal life and the true wisdom of the Torah in contrast to all those on the outside who toil in ‘the life of the moment’.

What is to be learnt from the fact that the most famous stories in both Greek and Torah traditions about knowledge and ignorance, truth and falsehood, focus on the tension between a cave and the world outside? What should be taken from the very sharp differences between the two stories? And what is the nature of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai's *teshuvah* when he discovers that truth might lie both outside the cave as well as inside it?

Plato's Cave, The Republic, Book VII

The full text appears at the end of the source sheet.

For our purposes now, this is a pretty good reconstruction:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ThmQTUFpJXM>

And in contemporary culture: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zE7PKRjrid4>

1. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's Cave – Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 33b-34a

Part I

Rabbi Judah, Rabbi Yose, and Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai were sitting. And Judah ben Gerim was sitting near them. Rabbi Judah began and said, “How great are the deeds of this [Roman] nation! They established (*tikenu*) markets; they established (*tikenu*) bathhouses; they established (*tikenu*) bridges.” Rabbi Yose was silent. Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai answered and said, “What they made, they made for themselves. They made markets so they could set prostitutes there, bathhouses so they could enjoy themselves, bridges to collect a toll.” Judah ben Gerim went and repeated their words which were heard by authorities.

[The authorities] said, “Judah who elevated will be elevated, Yose who was silent will be exiled to Sepphoris, and Shimon who disgraced will be killed.”

Part II

Rabbi Shimon and his son went and hid in the house of study. Every day his wife brought him bread and a jug of water, and they ate. When the decree was harshened, he said to his son, “Women have a weak constitution; perhaps they will torture her and she will reveal us.”

They went and hid in a cave. A miracle occurred and a carob tree and a well of water were created for them. They used to remove [their clothing] and sit up to their necks in sand. All day they used to commit traditions to memory, and at the time of prayer they dressed, covered and prayed. And then they took off their clothes so that they would not wear out.

They lived in the cave for twelve years. Elijah came and stood at the opening of the cave. He said, “Who will tell the son of Yohai that Caesar is dead and his decree was canceled?”

They went out. They saw people plowing and planting. Rabbi Shimon said, “They are forsaking eternal life and occupying themselves with temporal earthly life.” Every place they cast their eyes was immediately burned.

A heavenly voice came out and said, “Did you come out to destroy my world? Return to your cave!”

They returned and lived in the cave for twelve months. They said, “The sentence of the wicked in Gehinom is twelve months.” A heavenly voice came forth [and said,] “Get out of your cave.”

They went out. Everything that Rabbi Eliezer destroyed, Rabbi Shimon repaired. Rabbi Shimon said, “My son, I and you are enough for the world!”

When the Sabbath was about to start they saw an old man carrying two bundles of myrtle, running at twilight. They said to him, “Why do you need these?”

[He said to them,] “In honor of the Sabbath.” They said to him, “And isn’t one enough for you?”

He said to them, “One is for ‘remember’ (Shemot. 20:8), and one is for ‘keep’” (Devarim. 5:12).

He said to his son, “See how the commandments are beloved by Israel!” Their minds were at ease.

R. Pinhas ben Yair, his son in law, heard and went out to greet him. He took him to the bathhouse. He was massaging his flesh. He saw that there were clefts in his flesh. He was weeping and the tears were falling from his eyes and hurting him. R Pinhas said, “I am sorry to see you so”. R Shimon replied, “Be happy that you see me so. For if you did not see me so, you would not find me so learned”. For originally when R Shimon bar Yohai raised an objection R Pinhas ben Yair solved it with twelve solutions. Now when R Pinhas b. Yair objected, R. Shimon bar Yohai solved it with twenty four solutions.

Part III

Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai said, “Since a miracle occurred, let me go repair (*atkin*) something, since it says, And Yaakov came whole (*shalem*)” (Bereishit 33:18) Rav says, “he established coins for them.” And Samuel says, “he established markets for them.” Rabbi Yohanan says, “He established bathhouses for them.”

R Shimon said, “Is there something to fix? (*letaqonai*)”. They said to him, “There is a place of doubtful purity and it causes trouble (*tsa'ara*) for priests to go around it... Wherever the ground was hard he ruled pure. Wherever was loose he marked.

A certain old man said, “The son of Yohai made a cemetery pure”. R Shimon said, “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 “Even prostitutes paint each other. How much the more so should scholars!” He cast his eyes at him and his soul departed. He 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.

Shemot Ch.33

18 **יח** ויאמר: הֲרֹאֲנִי נָא, אֶת-כְּבוֹדְךָ. And he said: 'Show me, I pray You, Your glory.'

20 **כ** ויאמר, לא תוכל לראת את-פָּנַי: כי לא-יראני האדם, וְחִי. And He said: 'You cannot see My face, for no man shall see Me and live.'

21 **כא** ויאמר יהוה, הנה מקום אתי; ונצבת, על-הצור. And the LORD said: 'Behold, there is a place by Me, and you shalt stand upon the rock.'

22 **כב** והיה בעבר כְּבוֹדִי, וְשַׁמְתִּיהָ בְּנִקְרַת thee in a cleft of the rock, and will cover you with My hand until I have passed by.

23 **כג** וְהִסְרֹתִי, אֶת-פָּנַי, וְרֵאִיתָ, אֶת-אֶחָרָי; ופָּנַי, לא יראו. {פ} And I will take away My hand, and you will see My back; but My face shall not be seen.'

2. תלמוד בבלי מסכת סוכה דף מה עמוד ב Talmud Bavli, Sukkah 45b

ואמר חזקיה אמר רבי ירמיה משום רבי שמעון בן יוחי: יכול אני לפטור את כל העולם כולו מן הדין מיום שנבראתי עד עתה, ואילמלי אליעזר בני עמי - מיום שנברא העולם ועד עכשיו...
Hizqiah said, R. Yirmiah said in the name of R. Shimon bar Yohai, “I 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 when the world was created until now...”

ואמר חזקיה אמר רבי ירמיה משום רבי שמעון בן יוחי: ראיתי בני עלייה והן מועטין, אם אלף הן - אני ובני מהן, אם מאה הם - אני ובני מהן, אם שנים הן - אני ובני הן.

Hizqiah said, R. Yirmiah said in the name of R. Shimon bar Yohai, "I have seen those destined to ascend and they are few. If there 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 among them."

3. Rav Joseph Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 9

It is here, in this world, that halakhic man acquires eternal life!" Better is one hour of Torah and mitzvot in this world than the whole life of the world to come" stated the Tanna in Avot [4:17]... A lowly world is elevated through the halakhah to the level of a divine world... The only difference between religious man and halakhic man is a change of courses – they travel in opposite directions. Religious man starts out in this world and ends up in supernal realms; halakhic man starts out in supernal realms and ends up in this world. Religious man, dissatisfied, disappointed and unhappy craves to rise up from the vale of tears, from concrete reality, and aspires to climb up the mountain of the Lord... Halakhic man, on the contrary, longs to bring transcendence down into this valley of the shadow of death – i.e. into our world, and transform it into the land of the living.

4. בראשית רבה (וילנא) פרשת בראשית פרשה ח 8:5 Bereishit Rabba

א"ר סימון בשעה שבא הקדוש ברוך הוא לבראת את אדם הראשון, נעשו מלאכי השרת כיתים כיתים, וחבורות חבורות, מהם אומרים אל יברא, ומהם אומרים יברא, הה"ד (תהלים פה) חסד ואמת נפגשו צדק ושלוה נשקו, חסד אומר יברא שהוא גומל חסדים, ואמת אומר אל יברא שכולו שקרים... הה"ד (דניאל ח) ותשלך אמת ארצה, אמרו מלאכי השרת לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא רבון העולמים מה אתה מבזה תכסיס אלטיכסייה שלך, תעלה אמת מן הארץ, הדא הוא דכתיב (תהלים פה) אמת מארץ תצמח

Said Rabbi Simon: at the time when the Holy One created the first man, the ministering angels divided into factions and groups. There were those among them who said that man should not be created and there were those amongst them who said that he should be created. Thus does it say: 'Kindness and truth met, justice and peace kissed' (Tehillim 85). Kindness said, 'Create him for he will act kindly to others'. Truth said, 'do not create him for he is wholly false'. Thus does it say, 'And truth was thrown to the earth' (Daniel Ch.8). The ministering angels said before the Holy One: 'Master of the Universe: how can you debase the most beautiful of your jewels?' Thus is it written, "Truth shall grow from the earth' (Tehillim 85).

Appendix:

Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai's Cave

דיתבי רבי יהודה ורבי יוסי ורבי שמעון, ויתבי יהודה בן גרים גבייהו. פתח רבי יהודה ואמר: כמה נאים מעשיהן של אומה זו: תקנו שווקים, תקנו גשרים, תקנו מרחצאות. רבי יוסי שתק. נענה רבי שמעון בן יוחאי ואמר: כל מה שתקנו - לא תקנו אלא לצורך עצמן, תקנו שווקין - להושיב בהן זונות, מרחצאות - לעדן בהן עצמן, גשרים - ליטול מהן מכס. הלך יהודה בן גרים וסיפר דבריהם, ונשמעו למלכות. אמרו: יהודה שעילה - יתעלה, יוסי ששתק - יגלה לציפורי, שמעון שגינה - יהרג.

אזל הוא ובריה טשו בי מדרשא. כל יומא הוה מייתי להו דביתהו ריפתא וכוזא דמיא וכרכי. כי תקיף גזירתא, אמר ליה לבריה: נשים דעתן קלה עליהן, דילמא מצערי לה ומגליא לן. אזלו טשו במערתא. איתרחיש ניסא איברי להו חרובא ועינא דמיא. והוו משלחי מנייהו, והוו יתבי עד צוארייהו בחלא, כולי יומא גרסי, בעידן צלויי לבשו מיכסו ומצלו, והדר משלחי מנייהו כי היכי דלא ליבלו. איתבו תריסר שני במערתא. אתא אליהו וקם אפיתחא דמערתא, אמר: מאן לודעיה לבר יוחי דמית קיסר ובטיל גזרתיה? נפקו. חזו אינשי דקא כרבי זרעי, אמר: מניחין חיי עולם ועוסקין בחיי שעה! כל מקום שנותנין עיניהן - מיד נשרף. יצתה בת קול ואמרה להם: להחריב עולמי יצאתם? חזרו למערתכם! הדור אזול. איתבו תריסר ירחי שתא. אמרי: משפט רשעים בגיהנם - שנים עשר חדש. יצתה בת קול ואמרה: צאו ממערתכם! נפקו, כל היכא דהוה מחי רבי אלעזר - הוה מסי רבי שמעון. אמר לו: בני, די לעולם אני ואתה. בהדי פניא דמעלי שבתא חזו ההוא סבא דהוה נקיט תרי מדאני אסא, ורהיט בין השמשות. אמרו ליה: הני למה לך? - אמר להו: לכבוד שבת. - ותיסיג לך בחד? - חד כנגד זכור, וחד כנגד שמור. - אמר ליה לבריה: חזי כמה חביבין מצות על ישראל! יתיב דעתייהו. שמע רבי פנחס בן יאיר חתניה ונפק לאפיה, עייליה לבי בניה הוה קא אריך ליה לבישריה, חזי דהוה ביה פילי בגופיה, הוה קא בכי, וקא נתרו דמעת עיניה וקמצוחא ליה. אמר לו: אוי לי שראיתך בכך! - אמר לו: אשריך שראיתני בכך, שאילמלא לא ראיתני בכך - לא מצאת בי כך. דמעיקרא כי הוה מקשי רבי שמעון בן יוחי קושיא - הוה מפרק ליה רבי פנחס בן יאיר תריסר פירוקי, לסוף כי הוה מקשי רבי פנחס בן יאיר קושיא - הוה מפרק ליה רבי שמעון בן יוחי עשרין וארבעה פירוקי.

אמר: הואיל ואיתרחיש ניסא - איזיל אתקין מילתא, דכתיב ויבא יעקב שלם ואמר רב: שלם בגופו, שלם בממונו, שלם בתורתו. ויחן את פני העיר אמר רב: מטבע תיקן להם, ושמואל אמר: שווקים תיקן להם, ורבי יוחנן אמר: מרחצאות תיקן להם. אמר: איכא מילתא דבעי לתקוני? - אמרו ליה: איכא דוכתא דאית ביה ספק טומאה, ואית להו צערא לכהנים לאקופי. אמר: איכא איניש דידע דאיתחזק הכא טהרה? אמר ליה ההוא סבא: כאן קיצץ בן זכאי תורמסי תרומה. עבד איהו נמי הכי, כל היכא דהוה קשי - טהריה, וכל היכא דהוה רפי - צייניה. אמר ההוא סבא: טיהר בן יוחי בית הקברות! - אמר לו: אילמלי (לא) היית עמנו, ואפילו היית עמנו ולא נמנית עמנו - יפה אתה אומר. עכשיו שהיית עמנו ונמנית עמנו, יאמרו: זונות מפרכסות זו את זו, תלמידי חכמים לא כל שכן? יהב ביה עיניה, ונח נפשיה. נפק לשוקא, חזייה ליהודה בן גרים, אמר: עדיין יש לזה בעולם? נתן בו עיניו, ועשהו גל של עצמות.

Plato's Cave – The Republic Book VII

[Socrates:] And now, I said, let me show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened: -- Behold! human beings living in a underground cave, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the den; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that

they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets.

And do you see, I said, men passing along the wall carrying all sorts of vessels, and statues and figures of animals made of wood and stone and various materials, which appear over the wall? Some of them are talking, others silent.

They see only their own shadows, or the shadows of one another, which the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave? And if they were able to converse with one another, would they not suppose that they were naming what was actually before them. And suppose further that the prison had an echo which came from the other side, would they not be sure to fancy when one of the passers-by spoke that the voice which they heard came from the passing shadow?

To them, I said, the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images.

And now look again, and see what will naturally follow if the prisoners are released and disabused of their error. At first, when any of them is liberated and compelled suddenly to stand up and turn his neck round and walk and look towards the light, he will suffer sharp pains; the glare will distress him, and he will be unable to see the realities of which in his former state he had seen the shadows; and then conceive some one saying to him, that what he saw before was an illusion, but that now, when he is approaching nearer to being and his eye is turned towards more real existence, he has a clearer vision, -what will be his reply? And you may further imagine that his instructor is pointing to the objects as they pass and requiring him to name them, -- will he not be perplexed? Will he not fancy that the shadows which he formerly saw are truer than the objects which are now shown to him?

And if he is compelled to look straight at the light, will he not have a pain in his eyes which will make him turn away to take and take in the objects of vision which he can see, and which he will conceive to be in reality clearer than the things which are now being shown to him?

And suppose once more, that he is reluctantly dragged up a steep and rugged ascent, and held fast until he 's forced into the presence of the sun himself, is he not likely to be pained and irritated? When he approaches the light his eyes will be dazzled, and he will not be able to see anything at all of what are now called realities.

He will require to grow accustomed to the sight of the upper world. And first he will see the shadows best, next the reflections of men and other objects in the water, and then the objects themselves; then he will gaze upon the light of the moon and the stars and the spangled heaven; and he will see the sky and the stars by night better than the sun or the light of the sun by day?

Last of he will be able to see the sun, and not mere reflections of him in the water, but he will see him in his own proper place, and not in another; and he will contemplate him as he is.

He will then proceed to argue that this is he who gives the season and the years, and is the guardian of all that is in the visible world, and in a certain way the cause of all things which he and his fellows have been accustomed to behold?

And when he remembered his old habitation, and the wisdom of the den and his fellow-prisoners, do you not suppose that he would felicitate himself on the change, and pity them?

And if they were in the habit of conferring honours among themselves on those who were quickest to observe the passing shadows and to remark which of them went before, and which followed after, and which were together; and who were therefore best able to draw conclusions as to the future, do you think that he would care for such honours and glories, or envy the possessors of them? Would he not say with Homer,

Better to be the poor servant of a poor master, and to endure anything, rather than think as they do and live after their manner?

He would rather suffer anything than entertain these false notions and live in this miserable manner.

Imagine once more, I said, such an one coming suddenly out of the sun to be replaced in his old situation; would he not be certain to have his eyes full of darkness?

And if there were a contest, and he had to compete in measuring the shadows with the prisoners who had never moved out of the den, while his sight was still weak, and before his eyes had become steady (and the time which would be needed to acquire this new habit of sight might be very considerable) would he not be ridiculous? Men would say of him that up he went and down he came without his eyes; and that it was better not even to think of ascending; and if any one tried to loose another and lead him up to the light, let them only catch the offender, and they would put him to death.