

**PARSHAT BEHAR/BECHUKOTAI**  
**MAY 4, 2013**  
**RABBI VERNON KURTZ**

One of the most intriguing individuals in Rabbinic literature is Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai. Only last week on Lag B'Omer, which is supposed to be the date of his death, the grave of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai was visited by thousands. On this day of joy in the midst of the sorrow of the Omer tens of thousands of people come to his tomb on Mount Meron to remember him for his devotion to the Jewish people and for his scholarship.

Who was Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai and why is he remembered by so many? In the Babylonian Talmud tractate on Shabbat a story is told of Rabbi Judah, Rabbi Yose, and Rabbi Shimon who were sitting, and Judah the son of proselytes who was sitting near them. Rabbi Judah began a conversation by observing that the Romans had erected such wonderful architectural wonders, "They have made streets, they have built bridges, they have erected baths." Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai said to him: "All what they made they made for themselves; they built marketplaces, to set harlots in them; baths to rejuvenate themselves; bridges to levy tolls for them." The story continues by stating that Rabbi Judah went to the Roman government and told them of the words of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai. The Romans issued a death sentence upon bar Yohai.

According to the story, Rabbi Shimon and his son hid themselves in the study hall, but when the decree became even more severe they went and hid in a cave. According to the Talmudic tradition, a miracle occurred and a carob-tree and water well was created for them. They would strip their garments and sit up to their necks in sand and study for days. In fact, according to the text, they dwelled twelve years in the cave. One of the reasons that the memory of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai is venerated is that according to a tradition it was during this time that he and his son wrote *The Zohar*, the major text of the mystical tradition in Judaism.

The story then continues that Elijah told them that the emperor had died and it was safe to exit the cave. So they emerged. Seeing a man plowing and sowing, they exclaimed, "They forsake life eternal and engage in life temporal." Whatever they cast their eyes upon was immediately burnt up. A heavenly voice then came forth and said that they must return to the cave and dwell there another twelve months.

As that period of time ended they were allowed to come forth from the cave. Rabbi Eleazar, the son of Rabbi Shimon, continued in his former ways, but Rabbi Shimon had learned his lesson.

On the eve of the Shabbat before sunset they saw an old man holding two bundles of myrtle and running at twilight. "What are these for?" they asked him. "They are in honor of the Shabbat," he replied. "But one should suffice you?" they said. "One is to *Remember* and one is to *Observe*." Rabbi Shimon then said to his son, "See how precious are the commandments to Israel." They now were ready to rejoin the community.

According to this story, Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai was a zealot who had difficulty living in the real world. He imagined a utopian paradise where eternal life is superior to temporal values. According to his view, only by a total – absolutely total – commitment to Torah study is there a possibility of redemption.

In our Torah reading this morning we are told of the laws of the Shemittah and the Yovel, the sabbatical year and the jubilee year. Once every seven years the land was to lie fallow and the children of Israel were to recognize they were mere tenants on earth. Once every fifty years the land was to return to its original families and each individual was to return to his holding. Thus, in the fiftieth year families reclaimed the land that they held originally and later sold.

While the sabbatical year is still commemorated on the seven-year cycle in the State of Israel, the jubilee year laws do not exist. In fact, it is not known whether the jubilee was ever observed in actual practice. It is not mentioned in the biblical history of First Temple times, and according to the Rabbis it was not observed in Second Temple times at all. Its purpose was a utopian vision, that is, the land returning to its original owner and the release of indentured persons. While its purpose may have been laudatory, it simply became impractical to observe. The arrangements for the jubilee release entailed the most cumbersome complications, and once the tribal territories had disappeared as a historical fact in the Second Temple period, the rabbis devised a legal mechanism and in effect abrogated the jubilee.

It is all well and good to live in or to dream of a utopian paradise. However, that is not where real life occurs. Real life occurs in the real world that is filled with challenges, difficulties, and real problems.

It is rather interesting that in the Messianic view of Jewish tradition there is not a return to the Garden of Eden. The Garden of Eden may have been paradise, but that's not the ultimate goal of national salvation. We do not ask to return to that primordial paradise. Maimonides, for instance, suggested that the only difference between this world and the Messianic age will be the subjugation of nations. All else will remain the same.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai wanted to live in a utopian world. He couldn't understand why individuals would be plowing in the fields when they could be studying Torah. The story teaches us that it is impossible to live in that pristine world. Instead, we learn the lesson that one can enhance life and create of it a thing of beauty, but only if one dirties one's hands with the real world.

In their book *How to Be a Jew: Ethical Teachings of Judaism*, Bryon Sherwin and Seymour Cohen write in their introduction that, "While little Jewish genius was invested throughout the ages to create works of fine art, much Jewish genius and effort were expended on the endeavor to create lives that were works of art. Rather than concentrating on things of beauty, Jewish teachings focused on the creation of people of beauty. The primary goal was not physical prowess, or comely appearance, or even commercial success. Rather the goal was to become a shainer yid – a beautiful Jew – to create one's life as a work of art."

In the summer of 1941, most of the Jews of Sarajevo were herded onto trains and sent to concentration camps. Josef Kabilio, a Jewish artisan, was a close family friend of Mustafa Hardaga, a wealthy Muslim merchant. Not long after the Germans occupied Sarajevo, Hardaga went to inspect one of his properties and found Kabilio hiding there. Mustafa took Kabilio to his home and hid him there.

Zeyneba Hardaga, the merchant's wife, also had a close relationship with Kabilio. On one occasion she spotted him in a labor brigade and risked her life by bringing food to him and his fellow prisoners. Miraculously, Kabilio survived the war and returned to Sarajevo in 1945. Finding his home plundered, the Hardagas took him in. In 1948, he left for Israel, and the two families stayed in contact with one another. Over the course of many years, Josef Kabilio married, had children and grandchildren, and became a widower. Similarly, Zeyneba Hardaga in Sarajevo became a widow and then remarried, becoming a mother and grandmother. Zeyneba, eventually lost a second husband, lost all of her property and a good deal of her health.

Unbeknownst to her, Kabilio was hard at work in Jerusalem to have her recognized by Yad VaShem, as a Righteous Gentile. This award had never been given to a Muslim. Finally, when Kabilio turned 88, Zeyneba Hardaga received a letter from Yad VaShem telling her that she had received the award. Seven months later she came to Israel.

In 1992, war broke out in Sarajevo. Kabilio had already passed away, but in February 1994, Zeyneba Hardaga and her family were given special preference to escape the horrors of the war by leaving the city with 294 Muslims, Jews, Serbs and Croats on a convoy organized by the Joint Distribution Committee. This time the Muslims had their lives saved by a Jewish organization.

Kabilio's family went to the Israeli authorities and arranged for an El Al plane to be sent to Sarajevo to bring Zeyneba Hardaga and her daughter and family to Israel. The Muslim Hardaga saved Kabilio when his life was threatened, and the Jew Kabilio was instrumental in having the Hardagas saved when their lives were in danger.

In 1994, I was in Budapest, Hungary, and met a convoy of people who were saved from the siege of Sarajevo arrived on their way to Israel. It was the same convoy in which the Hardagas had been saved. Because of the heroism of the family they were taken separately to Israel. When our rabbinic group reached Israel we visited the Absorption Center in Mevasseret Zion where many of these people, including the Hardagas, were now living. Zeyneba Hardaga died within a year of arriving in Israel. Her daughter, now living in Britain, converted to Judaism.

It is a very messy world in which we live and it takes a great deal of fortitude, courage, and strength to make the right decisions. To simply look for utopian answers never suffices or brings salvation. Human beings must act in the land of the living to make a difference for others and the world at-large.

The jubilee year is a wonderful utopian vision but that is what it is, a vision. We are asked to live life and to make real decisions in real time. The Hargadas and the Kabilios did and

their families were brought to safety. Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai, the hero of Lag B'Omer, had to learn his lesson the hard way. One can make one's life a work of art, but only if one lives in the real world, experiences it and enhances it all along the way. I pray that we may learn the lesson well.