

"THE P'SHAT HEARD ROUND THE WORLD" Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai - by Rabbi Shmuel Simenowitz

Nearly 2000 years ago, in the tragic aftermath of the destruction of the *beis hamikdash*, an upstart rabbinical student provoked an educational revolution. As a result, the head of the Academy in Yavneh was deposed, a restrictive admissions policy was abolished and in a manner of speaking, the walls of the Academy came tumbling down. Thereafter, hundreds of new students were summarily admitted.

The *gemara* details the net result of this explosion. Firstly, on that very day (referred to throughout *shas* as "*bo bayom* ") the tractate of *Eduyos* (oral testimonies) was compiled. Further, the *gemara* notes that on that day, no *halachic* queries remained unanswered. *Rashi* explains that it was precisely as a result of the "*shakla v'tarya*" – the thrust and parry, the give and take of intellectual discourse on the highest level experienced as a result of the influx of new students.

This twofold contribution warrants closer scrutiny. That their empirical observations were recorded for posterity supports the proposition that life experience counts. Likewise, when minds which were formally trained for unrelated disciplines come together in pursuit of common inquiries, the results can be electrifying.

And who was the upstart whose forum shopping (asking the same question to different rabbonim – ordinarily a big "no no") precipitated this intellectual explosion? None other than Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.

This in essence is the mission statement and indeed the very *raison d'être* of Yeshivas Iyun Halacha. Firstly, on an individual level, life experience counts. Someone who practiced law or medicine, or taught or toiled in the world of finance or any one of the dozens of occupations and vocations within which our *chevra* are engaged, brings a formidable body of knowledge and experience to the table which if harnessed to the study of Halacha provides a potent growing mix within which the seedlings of Torah can thrive. More critically however, when those minds and skill sets meld together into a *chabura*, they create a spiritual and intellectual synergy in the wake of which "no question goes unanswered".

Rabbi Shimon had an uncompromising commitment to truth – even if it came at the expense of his own life or liberty. The famous *gemara in Shabbos* (daf 33 no less!) relates how he reacted when he heard flattery directed towards the Romans and their construction projects such as bridges, marketplaces and bathhouses. He exclaimed angrily (and I paraphrase) "Nonsense – they build bridges and roads to enhance their tax revenues. They build marketplaces and bathhouses as fronts for their immorality and hedonism." Forced to flee from the wrath of the Romans, he sought refuge in the cave and the rest, as they say, is history.

In a delightful grace note to the story, once he was able to leave the cave, the *gemara* goes on to explore his desire to show his *hakoras hatov* for the miracles that he had experienced. Shmuel (himself no stranger to commercial transactions) surmised that he built a marketplace. Rebbe Yochanan (himself no stranger to beauty and bathhouses) surmises that he built a bathhouse!

So we see that in essence, the Rashbi saga stands for the power of transformation – the "taking back" and elevating the mundane into the sublime. Nearly 2 millennia before "Occupy Wall Street" Rabbi Shimon was "occupying" and taking back the marketplaces and the bathhouses, transforming them into tools for the service of *HaKadosh Boruch Hu*. Similarly, Yeshivas Iyun Halacha has succeeded in "taking back" the Internet and has harnessed its awesome potential to transmit the light of Torah throughout the universe at the speed of light. I am entirely confident that Rabbi Shimon would approve!

Predictably, his *halachic* rulings embrace his spiritual *weltanschauung*. For example, the *gemara* states "*Rabbi Shimon leis lei muktzeh*" – that with a few notable exceptions, Rabbi Shimon is seemingly lenient when it comes to categorizing items as *muktzeh*. Perhaps what the *gemara* is really implying is that he is actually *machmir* in his belief that there was nothing that could not be pressed into the service of *Shabbos kodesh*.

Similarly, he saw the unlimited potential of all people and all things. In allowing the average man on the street to wear rose petal oil on *Shabbos* (which was usually worn only by royalty and nobility) Rabbi Shimon asserted that every Jew was in fact the "son of the King". Likewise, not only were *keilim* (vessels and utensils) able to be pressed into the service of *Shabbos*, but even *shivrei kelim* – broken pieces-retained "*toras shem k'li*" – their status as vessels and utensils and could be used in furtherance of *Shabbos* enhancement (The Shemen Sasson notes that, "*shivrei*" is comprised of the letters "*Rashbi*"!)

We live in a challenged era. Yet again, the *gemara* reassures us that "*k'dai hu Rabbi Shimon lismoch alav b'shaas had'chak*" – that it is entirely proper and worthy to "lean on" Rabbi Shimon during these turbulent times.

One year ago, the city of Baltimore was on fire. Baruch Hashem things have quieted down somewhat but the situation remains volatile as additional verdicts are awaited. Yet, the hundreds of thousands who flock to Meron every year on *Lag B'Omer* to dance by the bonfire with Rabbi Shimon aren't merely recalling people and places from long ago and far away. The fire of Rabbi Shimon is still dancing and he calls out to each and every one of us – the sons of princes and Kings – to dance by his fire to the timeless melody of transformation and spiritual elevation. Come – dance with us.