

On the Use and Misuse of Power—Talmud Shabbat 33b—Rabbi Richard Agler

Rabbi Yehuda opened and said, "How fine are the deeds of [the Roman] nation; they set up markets, they set up bridges, they set up bathhouses."

Rabbi Yose was quiet. Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai [Rashbi] answered and said, "All that they set up, they didn't set up except for their own needs; they set up markets to place prostitutes in them, bathhouses to pamper themselves, bridges to take taxes from them."

Rabbi Yehudah ben Gerim went and told over their words and they were heard by the government. [The government officials] said, "Yehuda that elevated [us] should be elevated, Yose that was quiet should be exiled to Tsippori, Shimon that disgraced [us] should be killed."

He [Rashbi] and his son [R. Eliezer] went [and] hid in the study hall. Every day, his wife would bring them bread and a container of water and they ate. When the decree became more pronounced, he said to his son, "Women have weak resolve; maybe [the Romans] will distress her and she will reveal [our location]." They went and hid in a cave.

A miracle occurred [and] a carob tree and a spring of water were created for them. And they would take off their clothes and would sit up to their necks in sand; the whole day they would study; at the time of prayers they would get dressed, cover themselves and pray; and [then] they would go back and take off their clothes so that they would not get worn out.

They sat for twelve years in the cave. Eliyahu came and stood at the entrance of the cave [and] said, "Who will inform Bar Yochai that the Caesar has died and that his decree has been annulled?"

They came out; they saw people that were plowing and planting. [Rabbi Shimon] said, "They are leaving over eternal life and involving themselves with temporary life." Every place upon which they would set their eyes would immediately burn. A Heavenly voice came out and said to them, "Did you come out [of the cave] to destroy my world? Go back to your cave!"

They returned and went [back]; they sat for twelve months; they [then] said, "the judgment of the wicked is twelve months in Gehinnom." A Heavenly voice came out and said, "Go out from your cave." They came out [again]. Every place that Rabbi Eliezer would strike, Rabbi Shimon would heal. He said to him, "My son, you and I are enough for the world."

As the [sun was setting] on the eve of Shabbat, they saw an old man holding two bundles of hyssops and running at twilight. They said to him, "What are these to you?" He said to them, "For the honor of the Shabbat." [They said back,] "Would one not suffice for you?" [He responded,] "One corresponding to (Exodus 20:7), 'Remember' and one corresponding to (Deuteronomy 5:11) 'Guard.'" [Rabbi Shimon] said to his son, "See, how beloved the commandments are to Israel." [And so] their minds were put at ease.