Mine Are the Eyes of Bar Yochai
by Rabbi Mendel Weinbach

The accompanying poem, "Mine Are the Eyes of Bar Yochai," recalls the Talmudic account of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, who hid in a cave from the Romans after the Bar Kochba rebellion was crushed in the second century CE. For 12 years, Rabbi Shimon and his son Rabbi Elazar lived off the fruit of a carob tree while studying Torah together and, according to popular tradition, developing the Zohar, the major work of Jewish mysticism. When the danger of Roman retribution had passed, the two emerged from their cave to find a world of men engaged in plowing, planting and reaping.

"How can men thus forsake eternal life to indulge themselves in a transient one?" shouted Rabbi Shimon when he realized that his fellow Jews were not continuously occupied in Torah study.

A Heavenly voice answered: "Have you come out to destroy my world? Return to your cave!"

Another year passed, and the two once again emerged from the cave. This time Rabbi Shimon was ready to accept the ways of men, but his son was not. "It is sufficient for the world," Rabbi Shimon pleaded, "that the two of us study Torah without interruption."

But Rabbi Elazar remained unconvinced.

Until one Friday afternoon, just before the sunset was to usher in the Sabbath. They saw an old man running home, his arms clutching two bunches of myrtle blossoms.

"What are these for?" they asked him.

"In honor of the Sabbath."

"Isn't one sufficient?"

"One of them," the old man explained, "is for the Heavenly command of Zachor, 'remember' the Sabbath to keep it holy; the other is for the second command, Shamor, 'observe' the Sabbath by ceasing from all creative labor."

"See how much love the Jews have for their commandments!" Rabbi Shimon exclaimed, and at last his son was reconciled.

Tractate Shabbat 33

Elsewhere, the Talmud notes that Rabbi Shimon, whose total immersion in Torah study even exempted him from the requirement of regular prayers, once disputed the opinion of Rabbi Yishmael, who believed that man could combine the study of Torah with a worldly occupation.

Rabbi Shimon asked: "If a man plows in the plowing season, sows in the sowing season, reaps in the reaping season, threshes in the threshing season and winnows in the season of wind, what is to become of the Torah? But, when Israel performs the will of God, their work is performed by others." ... Said Abaye: "Many have followed the advice of Rabbi Yishmael and it has worked well; others have followed Rabbi Shimon and it has not been successful."

Tractate Berachot 35

They see about them
Yet look beyond
They see
A landscape of men serving the Earth
Which bore them to be its masters
And heirs on that day when all landscapes
Will fade into a patient horizon

They look
At these toilers as condemned murderers of
Time, vengefully strangled by the hands
Of a clock whose tireless ticking drowns out
The sweet murmur of eternity

Mine are the eyes of Bar Yochai
They see men
Yet seek angels

They see
An ancient rushing toward a sunset
Which lies on weary Earth like
A comforting blanket to be clutched
When weekday nightmare ends

They look
At the blossoms in that yearning grip
The twin symbols of a frail beauty
That only blooms till another sunset and
Fading, leaves a fragrance for lesser days

Mine are the eyes of Bar Yochai
They see foothills
Yet seek mountains

They see
Men who are able to find their God
Whispering to him their prayer of perfect faith
In a sublime thought or gesture of kindness
Which paints his portrait on Earthly canvas

They seek
The perfect image of his glory which only
His wisdom and word project on a screen
For mind alone to see - and seeing, finds
Dimensions long outlined by heart

Mine are the eyes of Bar Yochai
They see earth
Yet seek heaven

They see
Men stumbling, as they climb
My royal road to perfection
Forced to admit the reality
Of a world that is but illusion

They seek
Those few who lose not heart
Who know that the Levite gift
Of freedom from Earthly needs
Is due each true servant of God

Mine are the eyes of Bar Yochai
They set history
Yet seek eternity

They see
earth
Yet seek heaven
They see
Men stumbling, as they climb
My royal road to perfection
Forced to admit the reality
Of a world that is but illusion

They seek
Those few who lose not heart
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They set history
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