

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

Produced by the Ohr Somayach Office of Information and Communication

General Editor: Rabbi Moshe Newman

©1997 Ohr Somayach International - All rights reserved.

Production Design: Lev Seltzer

If you have access to **InterNet** E-Mail, you can receive publications like this one minutes after they become available. Approximately once a month we will automatically send the latest publication to your E-Mail box. Just subscribe to the OS-SPECIAL list.

To subscribe, send the message "sub os-special {Your Full Name}" to listproc@virtual.co.il

