



How to Make Fad Judaism Work

How do rabbis behave when they emerge from their "Rabbi-Cave"?

Everyone is a Dietician

In modern society, we continue to see the phenomenon of people starting whatever new diet becomes popular. And then, we also see how two days after they start the new diet, these same people start sharing their experience with everyone they come in contact with, advising them all to try this new diet.

And the funny thing is, it doesn't matter what the health problem is. If you tell them that you have digestive problems, they are immediately happy to advise you to try their new diet. If you have heart problems, you'll hear: "This diet was just made for this problem!" Back problems? Try the diet! No matter what the problem, the dieter will immediately "hawk his wares"—even though he only started it two days ago.

And what's more, these people generally do not tire of repeating the praises of their new diets, down to the most detailed details. They buy books explaining the diet. They give out these books for free to everyone passing by. In short, they drive everyone crazy.

And the same thing goes for new workouts: Yoga, Pilates, spinning, and so on. There's always a new fad workout. And people become so convinced that their new workout is the only way and the healthiest way to attain health that they "force" you to try the new workout

against your will—and if you so much as suggest opposition, they’re ready to use physical force to “convince” you how great the workout is.

But this concept exists in Judaism too.

The Rabbis in the Cave

Being in the vicinity of Lag B’Omer, the day of passing of the great Sage Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, let’s talk about Lag B’Omer a bit, and then connect it to this concept.

Miron, the town in the Holy Land where Rabbi Shimon is buried, is one of the most popular destinations in modern-day Israel—second only to the Kotel, the Western Wall, as a matter of fact.

In the course of the Lag B’Omer day, about 500,000 people traditionally visit Miron. Entire planeloads from overseas fly in to Israel just to visit Miron and pay their respects at Rabbi Shimon’s shrine on Lag B’Omer day.

Not only that, but throughout the rest of the year, another half-million people visit Miron. Bottom line? It is estimated that about one million people visit Miron each year.

Now on Lag B’Omer in Israel, the age-old Jewish custom is to light huge bonfires, around which everyone dances. Elsewhere, people are satisfied with a “bonfire” on the picnic barbeque grill.

But what the real reason that everyone “plays with fire” on Lag B’Omer?

The Talmud (Tractate Shabbos 33b) tells us about three students of Rabbi Akiva who had a meeting. These were Rabbi Yehuda Bar Ilai, Rabbi Yosi Ben Chalafta, and Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai. They were three of the five students of Rabbi Akiva who survived the plague

among Rabbi Akiva's students in which 24,000 of them died.

Rabbi Yehudah opened the meeting and said, "How pleasant are the deeds of this nation!" He went on to praise the Roman Empire, which ruled the Holy Land at the time. He said that while it's true that they oppress the Jews—they forbid the study of Torah, they enact decrees of heresy—they also do good things: "They repair marketplace, they repaired bridges, they repaired bathhouses." Meaning, the Roman Empire was responsible for leading the world progressively forward, like Western civilization today.

Rabbi Yosi remained silent.

Rabbi Shimon then spoke up. He said, "Everything that the Romans fixed, they only fixed for their own needs. They fixed the marketplaces to put disreputable women in them. They fixed the bathhouses to indulge themselves, and they fixed the bridges to impose royal taxes."

Rabbi Shimon basically argued that the Roman Empire's motive here was not "Tikun Olam," improving the world and making life better for everyone. Instead, they merely cared just for themselves: The bridges were just to make money, like today's toll roads, and the same thing with the bathhouses and so on.

At that meeting there was another person in attendance who heard their discussion. His name was Yehudah Ben Gairim. He went and told his family what he had heard, and slowly but surely the story circulated until the Roman Emperor himself heard it.

As the Talmud puts it, the Romans then immediately decreed that "Yehudah who appreciated shall be appreciated"—Rabbi Yehudah Bar Illa'i, who had praised the Roman Empire, will be turned into a man of distinction. Apparently, they gave him some official title, like today's knighthood or British nobleman: "Sir," or "Lord."

The Talmud continues: “Rabbi Yosi, who was silent, shall be exiled to Tzipori”—Rabbi Yosi was punished with banishment. Apparently, he had lived previously in the south, in Yavneh, and now he was banished to the north, to Tzipori.

And the Talmud concludes: “Shimon who disparaged shall be killed”—Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, who spoke against the Empire, had a death sentence put out on him, like the Communists in the old Soviet Empire.

At first, Rabbi Shimon and his son Rabbi Elazar hid in a beis midrash, a study hall. Every day, his wife would secretly bring them food to eat. But when the search for him grew stronger, Rabbi Shimon said to his son that they will probably arrest his wife and submit her to torture that she would not be able to withstand, and she will then reveal their hiding place. So, Rabbi Shimon decided that they needed to run and hide in a location that even she didn’t know.

So they went and hid in a cave.

In the cave, a miracle happened and an entire carob tree sprouted up to give them fruit to eat, and a freshwater wall sprung up so they would have water to drink.

And so they lived in the cave, studying Torah and praying every day—for 12 straight years.

(There is a legend that they kept small fires burning in the cave to keep themselves warm, which is one reason why we have the custom of lighting bonfires on Lag B’Omer.)

But hiding in a cave for well over an entire decade, in complete isolation and suffering, left them very far from material matters and worldly concerns. They became extremely spiritual human beings—to them, it no longer mattered what kind of car you drove or how your

house or clothes looked. The entire physical plane was of no concern to them.

Their spiritual state was so high when they left the cave after the Roman Caesar died, that the Talmud tells us that when they saw people plowing and sowing their fields, they said, “These people are putting aside eternal life and busying themselves with temporary life!”

They simply could not understand how people could waste their time on small and unimportant things instead of studying Torah, which is true eternal life.

Not only that, but the Talmud tells us that “every place upon which they set their eyes was immediately incinerated; a Heavenly Voice came forth and said, ‘To destroy My world you came out?! Go back to your cave!’ And so they went back to the cave for another year.”

When they emerged once again, Rabbi Shimon said to his son, “For the world, you and I are enough”—meaning, there is enough spiritual power between the two of us to really change things. And so, instead of overpowering the world with their awesome spiritual powers, they worked to improve the world, helping people live normal and down-to-earth lives.

Be Like Rabbi Shimon

So we have something interesting happening here.

The first time Rabbi Shimon and son left the cave after 12 years, they failed to understand how no one was like them—kind of like a person starting the latest fad diet and not understanding how other people can actually not get that this is the greatest diet in the world.

And so, they were not ready to allow for the existence of people who did things differently—they “incinerated” them. No one could meet

their criteria.

And so, they went back to the cave for another year—and this time, they internalized that not everyone could live the way they lived, and that this way of life was only for them. Regular people, for their part, would need to continue living normal lives—and that's what G-d expected of them.

What essentially happened that in the course of that last year, they became Chasidim.

My friends, we see this phenomenon today when it comes to religion. It often happens that a religious person cannot understand how the other is not religious like him, especially if the religious person only recently discovered Judaism himself.

The newly religious person may think, "This is the best way of life there is, and if so, how can it be that someone doesn't live this way?" And so he tries to "convince" everyone of the truth of his new way of life. He debates, brings proofs, and tries to cram it down everyone's throat.

Such a person may need to go "live in a cave."

The lesson here, my friends, is that we need to act like Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai after he left his cave for the second time. For yourself, you may be as religious and strict as you like—but don't force other people to behave like you!

A Chasid is someone who is rigid with himself—but flexible with others.

Let us remember that the purpose of the ultimate fad, our own religion, is not to overpower the world or run away from it, but to grapple and interact and improve it—to work with it from inside it, and to make it the home that G-d wants it to be.