

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

THE MONTH OF ELUL

12 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Festive Table

Twelve questions drawn from the lectures of Rav Raphaël Benizri
on the month of Elul: forty days of reckoning and selichot,
between the broken Tablets and the second Tablets — why the
shofar is sounded from the first day, why the sign of the month is
the virgin, and why it is said that the King has gone out into the
field.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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The twelfth month, when the accounts are drawn up



PRESENTATION

Elul is the twelfth month counting from Tishrei, and the sixth counting from the Exodus from Egypt. At its root lies the harvest: the fruit of the whole year. And in Aramaic, the word means to explore.

THE QUESTION

What is there to explore for forty days, if the year's balance sheet is already drawn up and nothing that has been lived can be erased?

THE ANSWER

The Aramaic translation in which “they explored the land” renders the verb from which the month's name derives; the numerical value of Elul, identical to that of binah, understanding.

Just as a balance sheet is drawn up in any business, in the twelfth month a person must see where he truly stands. Elul is the harvest, that is, the fruit of the whole year; in Aramaic it is research, inquiry, the exploration of oneself, the exploration of one's abilities. And its numerical value is that of binah, understanding, reflection, meditation — the kind that leads a being to disconnect from himself in order to go beyond what he is.

For man tends to approach life with a certain lightness, and that lightness does not serve his fulfilment. As long as we breathe things from the inside and think of them only from our own point of view, we remain shut in, within the confines of a reason proportionate to our intelligence. Today advertisers tell us to drive outside the bodywork; we should first learn to think outside our own bodywork.

And let us not look for G-d anywhere but within ourselves. If we are led to grasp Him outside ourselves, we are somewhere bordering on idolatry. That is the month's first teaching: to realise what we are, in space and in time. The true wise man is the one who knows his place and fills it well.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

A balance sheet that never leaves the bodywork is not a balance sheet: it is a mirror.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We all know how to list what we have done; we do not know how to step out of our own point of view to judge it. Let each person name one decision from this year that he would argue differently if he had to plead it in the other's place. And: have I truly filled my own place, or my neighbour's?

Blessed the fault of having broken the Tablets



PRESENTATION

On the first of Elul, Moshe goes up for forty days to receive the second Tablets, which will be given on Yom Kippur. This time, G-d tells him to hew the stone himself: only the writing is divine. And our Sages count the breaking of the first Tablets among Moshe's great achievements.

THE QUESTION

How can breaking the Tablets of the Law be counted to the credit of the one who broke them?

THE ANSWER

The command given to Moshe: “Hew for yourself” the second Tablets; the first, whose writing and Tablets were the work of G-d.

The first Tablets were entirely imposed from above, and that did not correspond to what the people could truly do, to what they could adopt. The second are not essentially different in spirit, but they are not identical in the letter: they are closer, more accessible at the level of the people, better suited to the possibilities of a man who can be an angel only at moments in his life.

For the law does not have to be given entirely and imposed from outside. A participation of the self is needed to forge these laws. This time it is you, Moshe, who will hew the stone, write this law and bring it within the people's reach, so that it may win their consent. “Write them on the tablet of your heart”: there is no point reducing it to pure logical knowledge; you must live it from within, you must rewrite it.

And the sin that made this necessary, the sin of the calf, is the sin of the circle: it is when we settle into a routine, and even the precepts of the Torah become so commonplace that we perform them without intention, without absorbing them into the depths of ourselves. That is why Elul begins on the day we go up to seek a law that man will hew himself.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

What is handed to us ready-made does not bind us; what we have hewn ourselves no longer breaks.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We hold many of our practices from an outside authority, and we perform them without ever having made them our own. Which one would each of us do differently if he had to hew it himself? And which do we still do purely out of habit, without putting a gram of intention into it?

SUBJECT 03

One letter is missing, and the whole scroll is unfit



PRESENTATION

The Jewish people number as many souls as there are letters in a Torah scroll. And in a scroll, the slightest break in a single letter makes it unfit: it can no longer be read from. No second-rank letter, no optional letter.

THE QUESTION

If every person is a letter, what exactly happens in the world on the day one of them decides he is superfluous?

THE ANSWER

The law of the Torah scroll: a single damaged letter makes it unfit.

Each letter has its function within the word; it can bend it one way or the other. Each person answers to a particular mission, and each person is irreplaceable, contrary to what we think. Everything counts in the scroll. If a letter goes missing, the scroll is out of service — and the world is out of service when a person does not fulfil his function and declares himself absent.

The sign of the month is “I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine”: mine, each one individually, because it is important that each person stand out from the other through his personality, his function, his responsibilities. One must not diminish oneself, one must not shrink: on the contrary, one must realise one’s dimension and try to give it greater breadth.

And nothing is uniform. Space is not uniform, time is not uniform, and man even less so; just as there is a variety of plants, flowers, trees and minerals, there is a variety of flavours in the perception of spiritual values. It does not rest on the mass, it is not a clan: it rests on the “I”. Avraham was one, one alone. He fought his battle, and each of us is a little Avraham.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The most insignificant microbe can destroy a life; the most insignificant gesture can heal a world.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Around this table there are people who think nothing would change if they were not here. Let each person say what exactly the world would lose if he declared himself absent — not what he owns, what he does. And: whom did we let believe, this year, that he was an optional letter?

Circumcising the heart — one's own and one's children's



PRESENTATION

The initials of a verse in Deuteronomy form the name of the month: “Hashem your G-d will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring.” Not your heart alone: your children's too, in the same sentence and in the same act.

THE QUESTION

What can it mean to circumcise a heart — and by what right does the same operation engage the hearts of those who never asked for it?

THE ANSWER

“Umal Hashem Elokecha et levavecha ve'et levav zar'echa” — the initials of the verse form Elul; the sign of the month: the virgin.

Circumcision is a primary statement: it means going against nature, against natural laws. Man must not be left in his first nature, in his raw nature: he must be reconciled to it through his flesh, he must be taught to love, not to remain indifferent, not to kick over everything his parents have built. And the foreskin has a wide range of resonance: it lies at different levels of our emotions, of our speech, of our language.

Two instincts threaten our existence: the abuse of the desires that are the foundation of our being, and an inflated regard for oneself, when we no longer have the true measure of our own possibilities and are overtaken by covetousness, by a spirit of competition, running with others along paths that are not ours.

That is why the sign of the month is the virgin: “Return, O virgin of Israel.” We must recover that virginity, not of state but of spirit. We face many trials, and it is impossible not to have picked up dust, sand or mud somewhere along the way. And Elul calls us not only to give our love a new tone, but to place greater emphasis on the education of our children, on whom our future depends.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We do not circumcise only our own heart: what we cut away, we stop passing on.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Our failings do not stop with us: they carry on in the home, in table manners, in what the children believe is allowed. Let each person name the trait he does not want to see passed to the next generation. And this question: are we, at this moment, running along a path that is not our own?

On Pesach He comes to us, in Elul we go to Him



PRESENTATION

Two verses of the Song of Songs resemble each other and say the opposite. “My beloved is mine and I am his”: that is Pesach. “I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine”: that is Elul. The same couple, but the movement has changed direction.

THE QUESTION

Why does it take a whole month to say what Pesach says in a single night — and what changes when we are the ones who begin the sentence?

THE ANSWER

The two verses of Shir HaShirim: “Dodi li va’ani lo” and “Ani ledodi vedodi li”; the anniversary of the Exodus in Nissan.

There are two anniversaries. The one proper to the Jewish people, which affirms its birthright, is the Exodus from Egypt, in Nissan — and we prepare for it thirty days in advance. During Nissan we are under the sign of “my beloved is mine”: it is He who fills me with everything, and I answer His call. Everything comes from above. We are recognised as the firstborn, and there can be only one firstborn.

Elul is the reverse: it is an impulse of the self towards the Creator, from below upwards. I give myself to Him, and in proportion to that self-giving I will be able to receive in return. I have received everything; what have I done with it? I have not been fully up to standard, I have let this love wear thin somewhere — so it must be given a new impulse, and that impulse comes from below.

And the first falsification that threatens a being is that of love, when there is no longer any reciprocity. The relationship we live with the Absolute is the one we live in miniature in the relationship of a couple. The Creator reflects back to me the image I give Him: everything depends on my investment. That is what a couple’s relationship means in Elul; on Rosh Hashanah it becomes a relationship of father and son.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

As long as we wait for the other to begin the sentence, we have said nothing.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Some loves in our lives still hold only because the other keeps giving first. Let each person say to whom, this year, he has done nothing but respond. And this question, for this month: what first step, which no one expects of us any more, will we take before Rosh Hashanah?

The measure of a man is what he gives



PRESENTATION

A third verse also yields the initials of the month, and it comes from an unexpected place: the Megillah of Esther. “Each man to his fellow, and gifts to the poor.” Not a law of Yom Kippur, not a prayer: a rule of Purim.

THE QUESTION

Why does the month of personal reckoning seek its watchword in a festival where we send portions to our neighbour?

THE ANSWER

“Ish lere’ehu umatanot la’evyonim”, in the Megillah of Esther — the initials form Elul.

A man is measured first of all by the dimension of his generosity. It is the capacity to give that says what he is. And there is a movement of unity in the people in which each person recognises himself through his fellow, and his generosity goes to those who lack everything — but careful, there are different kinds of lack: a lack of comfort, an intellectual lack, a lack of means of subsistence.

Now who is this fellow? The companion par excellence, the one who accompanies us all the time, is G-d Himself: we walk with Him and we ignore Him. Just as the Creator has buried a fragment of His light in every being, He has buried a part of me in my fellow. There is a part of me in my wife; she is different, entirely different, but she carries the share of light that I share with her.

And if I do not show my fellow what I ask G-d to show me, what are my requests worth before the Creator? It is the same network, the same connection. Book-keeping reciprocity breeds only violence: you said to me, I said to you, you did this to me, I pay you back in kind. It is the worst of conduct. A covenant of hesed does not place things in total equality, but in an inequality in the other’s favour.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

What we ask of Heaven, we ask in the language we speak to our neighbour.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Without admitting it, each of us keeps accounts: what I did for him, what he never returned. Let each person say with whom he is still keeping that account. And this question for the selichot: would we dare ask Above for exactly the measure we grant here below?

When the curse is a blessing



PRESENTATION

Before Shavuot we read a section of curses; before Rosh Hashanah, another, heavier one, which ends with no consolation at all. And yet every year we wish: may the year end together with its curses, and may a year begin with its blessings.

THE QUESTION

How can we wish for a year of curses to end, when the section we read just before promises no end to them?

THE ANSWER

The two sections of curses, one read before Shavuot, the other before Rosh Hashanah; the question put to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.

The question was put to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, hiding in his cave, and he did not know what to answer: he began to weep and fell into a deep sleep. They came to wake him, telling him that in the second curses there is a secret, and that if there is no consolation, it is because the curse is in itself the blessing.

Our Sages expressed it with an image. When you throw a ball hard against a wall, it comes back to you: it has met a wall, it cannot destroy it, so it comes back. Since the breaking of the first Tablets, a decline has been hurling us towards nothingness; we are on a slippery road. But then rises G-d's promise never to separate this people's destiny from the very existence of the world. This falling movement meets that primal force, which throws it back: it is no longer possible to slide, one must recover.

And it is the same with exile. The verse says: when you have children and grandchildren, and you have grown old in the land. Now this growing old shares its root with sleep: indolence, routine. The greatest danger is to disappear by blending into the nations, when we no longer see the difference. So, two years before the threat materialises, He exiles His people — to recondition it elsewhere, so that it rethinks itself and decides on its own to return.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Trials are never there to banish us from the land, but to allow us to renew our life energies.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

This year, we have all hit a wall: a closed door, a refusal, a loss. Let each person name the wall he was thrown back from. And this question, without self-indulgence: did that wall make us climb back up, or have we stayed there resenting the wall?

A sound that cannot become a word



PRESENTATION

From the second day of Elul, the shofar is sounded every morning. The shofar is not a musical instrument: it is not put in an orchestra, it joins with nothing. And the verb used for sounding it literally means to thrust in.

THE QUESTION

Why does it take a sound that cannot be translated into any word to wake a person up?

THE ANSWER

The verse: “Shall the shofar be sounded in the city and the people not tremble?”; Yitzchak's trembling when Yaakov comes before him dressed in Esav's garments.

There are three stages in the manifestation of speech. Breath first: the child has his breath but has not yet articulated it, and expresses his needs only through tears. Then he articulates that breath, he gives it a body. The shofar is the first breath of speech, before it becomes speech: it is still expressed only through groans and sobs. It is speech in gestation.

And why do we speak of thrusting the shofar? Because we have adopted a formal language that lets us disguise every situation, politicise our language, seduce, lie, deceive. To fight this, a new sound is needed. At Sinai, the voice of the shofar grew ever louder: not a bird chirped, not an animal made a sound, the earth stood still. Language had to be found again, recreated.

As for the trembling the shofar provokes, we must go back to its first appearance in the text: Yitzchak was seized by an extreme trembling when Yaakov came before him, dressed in Esav's garments, to take the blessing. His whole plan had just been foiled. And a second time, when Yosef's brothers, coming back from Egypt, find their money in their sacks and wonder what is being prepared for them. Trembling is that shock which halts the course of an event and forces us to rethink it otherwise.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Today children play with the shofar and contests are held for the longest blast; the shofar is the strangled cry of the soul.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We all speak a language that smooths things over: at work, with those close to us, with ourselves. Let each person own up to one phrase he keeps repeating that disguises a situation. And this question: what should, this year, stop the course of our life dead and force us to rethink it?

The soul taken hostage



PRESENTATION

The sections read during Elul speak of war. The text says: when you go out to war and G-d delivers him into your hands, you shall take his captive captive. Not “you shall take him captive”: you shall take captive what was already captive.

THE QUESTION

Who, in this war, was already holding a hostage before we set out on campaign — and who is that hostage?

THE ANSWER

The verse “veshavita shivyo”, you shall take his captive captive; the law of the beautiful captive and her month of mourning.

This war is that of all Israel, and it consists in rediscovering the soul that is held hostage within each one of us. Why hostage, and not a lost or vanished soul? Because we have not given it any regard. We have locked it away. It kept sending us signs, and we reduced it to silence. We did not allow it to weep for its father and mother, to strip itself bare; we did not want it to find its source and origin again, and we used it like a worn-out garment.

The people were told: My sanctuary, I grant it to you — find this sanctuary within yourselves, rediscover it in your homes, be yourselves a walking sanctuary. For when the enemy poured out his anger on wood and stone, it was also so that our place of inspiration would cease to be wood and stone.

And when one returns from a victorious war, it is said: very well, you have mastered the outer enemy; but your inner enemy, have you overcome it? That is the true war. It is a matter of self-regeneration, and that regeneration is restoration itself: tikkun and the root meaning to restore are the same letters.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

One can win all one's outer wars and come home with a hostage in one's chest.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Everyone here has silenced, at least once, an inner voice that was asking for something other than what he chose. Let each person say which sign he refused. And this question for the month: which outer victory are we proudest of — and what did it cost us within?

The King is out in the field



PRESENTATION

During Elul, we say that the King is in the field. He is not seated in His palace, no one requests an audience: He is making a tour. And He is not inspecting His lands — He is looking for His children.

THE QUESTION

Why does a king leave his palace to go himself, into the fields, in search of those who should have come to him?

THE ANSWER

The expression “HaMelech basadeh”, the King is in the field, proper to the month of Elul.

He is looking for His children. For the notion of father can exist only if there are children: if there is no child, one does not taste the joy of being a father, one does not know that attribute. And it is indeed a father who is within reach of his people during this month, not a distant master of whom one wonders what He thinks wherever He may be: call upon Him while He is near.

But there is a way of missing this passing. The Song of Songs tells it: my beloved knocks, he says open to me. And I answer: I have already taken off my garment, how shall I put it on again, shall I get out of bed to go and open? And when at last I make up my mind, my beloved has gone, he has slipped away. That is us. We have had many moments in our lives that we could have seized and that would have given our life another direction.

But all is not lost, because this journey through time means we live in a permanent present. How is the present rendered in Hebrew? By the intermediate form — that is, a continuous action, always in the making. The past is no more, the future is yet to come, and the present slips away from me in the blink of an eye; but it is precisely there that I can make the past converge with the future, and reflect on the past so that it lights up the future.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The King passes through the field; it is not He who misses the appointment.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We have all, at least once, found a good reason not to get up and open. Let each person name the opportunity he let slip because the moment was inconvenient. And this question, this month: who is knocking at our door right now, and what are we waiting for to open it?

SUBJECT 11

Sin stains only the garment



PRESENTATION

Every morning we ask that the soul given to us be recognised as pure. And yet we spend forty days asking forgiveness. We speak of covering the sin, as one repaints a dirty wall with a fresh coat.

THE QUESTION

If covering is enough, why speak of purity? And if the soul really is pure, what is left to erase?

THE ANSWER

The phrase recited every morning: “The soul You have given me is pure”; the thirteen attributes recited during the selichot.

Sin does not reach the essence. It reaches only the garment, it stains only the garment. On a dirty wall, you apply a fresh coat to cover it; here, no: there is a possibility of erasing. If I were not aware of the soul's purity, I could never erase what I have written, nor rediscover the spark I carry.

And we are far too inclined to believe that forgiveness is something granted to us, as if G-d could give it without our making the effort ourselves to erase, to restore, to repair. It is not He who is examining our hearts: it is we who analyse them, to see whether we are sincere with ourselves.

Now of any person, we perceive only the garment: his qualities, his virtues. And we discover G-d only through His thirteen attributes — but they remain abstract notions if we do not transpose them onto ourselves. If we do not show hesed ourselves, if we do not take truth into ourselves, reciting prayers is of no avail. That is why the tallit is the same for everyone in the synagogue: it is the garment that exposes everything, and it says that between the woodcutter and the water-drawer, no one is above anyone.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is not a matter of repainting: it is a matter of removing what hides.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We often confuse our faults with ourselves, and that is why we never touch them. Let each person name something for which he thought himself guilty for good, and which was only a garment. And this question: do we ask forgiveness to be quits, or to truly erase?

Thirty days to weep for one's father and mother



PRESENTATION

The last of the prophets opens with a direct reproach: if I am a father, where is My honour; if I am a master, where is the fear I should inspire? And he announces, for the end, a prophet who will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers.

THE QUESTION

Why does honouring one's parents appear on the first Tablet, among the commandments concerning the Creator, and not on the second with the laws between people?

THE ANSWER

The words of Malachi: "If I am a father, where is My honour?"; the commandment to honour father and mother, placed on the first Tablet.

On the first Tablet, each commandment bears the Name; on the second, it is absent. And it was asked what the honour due to parents was doing there, when it should have appeared with the laws between people. It is because there are three partners in every person: the father, the mother and the Presence. In a couple, one plus one does not make two: there is an additional presence in that union.

For everyone practises respect for parents; that intense love exists even among the most immoral, each in his own way, and it is inscribed in nature. Whoever has only natural gratitude does what all of humanity does. The difference begins when I link respect for parents to respect for the Heavenly Father: then it is no longer rationality, it is beyond all rationality. The father has his father, who has his father, and it goes back to Avraham, who recognises the Master of the world as father.

And there is a month of mourning for father and mother, thirty days: it is the month of Elul. We are weeping over our disconnection. Honouring parents is the axis around which all the other commandments turn. And the month of Elul, in the movement of return, means finding one's sources again, finding one's origins, going back up to the fathers, and acknowledging that we are their children.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Only the perverse borrow without ever repaying.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We can all name our parents, rarely their parents, almost never beyond. Tonight, let each person go back as far as he can and say the last name he knows. And this question: what do we owe them that we have not begun to repay — and to whom, unable to return it to them, will we pass it on?