

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

HANUKKAH

12 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Festive Table

Twelve questions drawn from the lectures of Rav Raphaël Benizri on Hanukkah: why the four exiles are written into the second verse of the Torah, why the war of the Maccabees was first of all an inner war, and why the only thing to outlive the Temple is a small light set at the threshold of our homes.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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SUBJECT 01

The top spins, but we are not the ones who set it spinning



PRESENTATION

We spin the top; it whirls in every direction and falls wherever it likes. The symbol looks like a child's game. Yet our Sages read the four exiles of the Jewish people in the second verse of the Torah, before light had even been created.

THE QUESTION

Why are the four exiles written into the verse that comes before the appearance of light — and what, then, is left of our own part in history?

THE ANSWER

Bereshit: “Veha'aretz hayetah tohu vavohu, vechoshech al penei tehom.” Tohu is Babel; vohu is Persia; choshech, darkness, is Greece; tehom, the deep, is Rome.

The history of the Jewish people spins like this top and always faces the same problems: there is a hand above that set it spinning, and we merely follow the motion of four exiles programmed independently of our will, written into the very origins of creation. The destiny of the Jewish people through its exiles must be sought in the pre-creation, before light is revealed.

Babel sought to disintegrate us by depriving us of our national entity: we survived, and there we developed the Oral Law. Persia attacked our emotional life, then decreed physical extermination — that was our first Shoah, averted by Mordechai and Esther. Greece, for its part, seeks to reach us spiritually, by substituting universal values for our own, so as to dissolve us as one nation among the nations. And Rome, Edom, is the sum of all the others.

But if these exiles are written before the light, it is because they are revelations in potential: it is out of this darkness that the primordial light bursts forth, the light we perpetuate on Hanukkah, starting from a very small light that keeps growing and is destined to illuminate the whole world.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Darkness is not the absence of light: it is the place from which light is called to come forth.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

It is easy to say that everything is written, and wash our hands of it. Yet the top spins, and it is up to us to kindle. What do we endure in our lives as if it were fate — and what, in reality, is only waiting for our decision?

SUBJECT 02

The Greeks did not destroy the Temple



PRESENTATION

Babel burned the sanctuary; Rome razed it. The Greeks left it standing. They asked only that other beliefs be associated with it. And it was against that very proposal that the revolt of the Maccabees broke out.

THE QUESTION

If the Greeks left the Temple standing and the service in place, against whom did the Maccabees really go to war?

THE ANSWER

The war waged by the Jewish people was waged above all against the *mityavnim*, that is, against the tendency within the people itself to want to be like the nations and to let itself be seduced by Greek art, Greek science, Greek thought — at the very moment when the voice of prophecy fell silent. It is a war within the Jewish people. The Greeks did not destroy the sanctuary as the Babylonians did, or as Edom would: they kept the Temple, on condition that other beliefs could be associated with it.

What they demanded was that we renounce the exclusivity of the Jewish faith, and above all its national dimension. The people were offered the chance to keep their traditions, on condition that they renounce any aspiration to a national entity — and Yehudah the Maccabee would hear none of it. For the national entity is an essential *mitzvah*: the Torah can be fully accomplished only in Eretz Israel, and to conceive of it outside Eretz Israel is to cut away half its virtues.

Even today, the *mityavnim* among us speak of a state like all other states, open to every culture. Why not? That is exactly where Yavan lies.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We were never asked to stop believing: we are only asked to believe like everyone else.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The Greek proposal was gentle: keep your traditions, just give up what sets you apart. What have each of us already agreed to give up so as not to stand out — at the table, at work, among friends? And what would we still refuse to give up?

SUBJECT 03

The day the Bible was translated was a day of mourning



PRESENTATION

Ptolemy shuts seventy-two Sages of Israel away separately and has them translate the Bible into Greek. The versions are identical. The Jews of Alexandria rejoice; the people of Jerusalem make it a day of mourning.

THE QUESTION

One and the same event, joy on one side, mourning on the other: what did the Sages of Jerusalem see that those of Alexandria did not?

THE ANSWER

“Yaft Elokim le-Yefet, ve-yishkon be-oholei Shem” — may the beauty of Yefet dwell in the tents of Shem.

The Jews of Alexandria rejoiced at being able to spread this teaching across humanity; the people of Jerusalem held that to translate was to limit the reach of the biblical word by passing it into another language. Yet our Sages approved of the undertaking, saying that the beauty of Yefet must dwell in the tents of Shem: Greek thought, Greek art, technology may find their place within the tent, on condition that there is no will to substitute one's own thought for that of the Torah.

The seventy-two Sages, without consulting one another, reproduced exactly the same text — except for thirteen nuances. And these thirteen nuances are the thirteen breaches opened in the wall that surrounded the sanctuary, the wall that barred entry to anyone lacking the required qualities. The thirteen checkpoints corresponded to the thirteen attributes by which G-d governs His world, the very ones proclaimed after the sin of the golden calf.

When the Hasmoneans were victorious, they did not build other ramparts: they simply sealed the breaches. For the coexistence of the two cultures is not to be ruled out — on condition that each recognizes its limits.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

To translate is not to betray; it is to open a breach, and one must know how far to let others in.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There is much beauty in our homes that came from elsewhere, and it has every right to be there. But under which tent? Let each person name one thing they let into their home without ever setting it a limit, and let us ask whether it is still a guest or whether it now gives the orders.

SUBJECT 04

A light in the window: in eight days, a Brit Milah



PRESENTATION

The Greeks banned circumcision. In hiding, the community has to be told that a boy has been born and that the Milah will take place in eight days. So one light is placed in the window on the first day, two on the second, and so on.

THE QUESTION

Our Sages bless the kindling with the words “who has commanded us” — but if it was the passers-by of an occupied street who invented the count, who commanded whom?

THE ANSWER

How, in the resistance, could one let others know that in this house a boy had been born whose circumcision must take place in eight days? On the first day one light was placed in the window, on the second day a second, on the third a third. Passers-by thus knew there would be a Milah in that house, since the lights kept increasing up to the eighth day.

This miracle of the eight days was not instituted by the rabbis: it came from the people. And our Sages adopted this tradition of the people, this resistance of the people, through the kindling on the eight days of Hanukkah. That is why the eight days are tied not only to the flask of oil, but to the Brit Milah and to everything this covenant establishes.

It was, moreover, a woman who sparked the revolt, and that is why a woman, although this mitzvah is time-bound, is obligated to kindle: she was part of this miracle.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

What the Sages commanded is first of all what the people, in the dark, had already invented.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Without being told, the people found a sign so as not to stay silent. Do we have a habit, a way of doing things, born not of a rule but of someone's faithfulness — a grandmother, a neighbour? Who at this table still keeps it, and who will carry it on?

The miracle lasted seven days — why do we celebrate eight?



PRESENTATION

The flask of oil held enough to burn for one day. It burned for eight. The arithmetic is simple, and the question is known to all: the miracle itself covers only seven days, since on the first day the oil was enough.

THE QUESTION

Since there is nothing miraculous about the first day, why not kindle seven lights — and what does this eighth day say that the other seven do not?

THE ANSWER

It is a well-known question: one should not have said the miracle took place over eight days, but over seven. Except that here the natural joins the supernatural. We hold that even the natural is a *nes nistar*, a hidden miracle, whose message we must know how to decipher. Everything that seems to us a matter of pure reason still contains an element that escapes our understanding and that likewise belongs to the miraculous.

Only the *benei vinah*, those who understand and know how to discern the thing, see the natural as one with the supernatural. And it is because they reached this level, seeing the hand of G-d take shape through events, that they instituted songs and praises.

Every victory we win by our own means, every event however natural, is an occasion to give thanks: there is always a hand taking shape behind it. Even the blessing we say on leaving the washroom links the most natural function of the body to the miracle — that says it all.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The eighth day does not add to the miracle: it teaches us to read the other seven.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We call a miracle whatever escapes us, and everything else “normal.” Let each person name something in their life they take as perfectly normal — a child's health, a job, someone's presence at this table. How long would we have to lose it before finding it miraculous?

The flask of oil does not appear in our prayers



PRESENTATION

Everyone tells the miracle of the little flask. Yet the two texts we recite around the lights — Ha-nerot halalu and Al ha-nissim — mention it nowhere. They speak of something else entirely.

THE QUESTION

Why is the miracle everyone tells absent from the texts everyone recites — and what do our prayers speak of instead?

THE ANSWER

Al ha-nissim: “Rabbim be-yad me'atim, teme'im be-yad tehorim, zedim be-yad oskei toratecha”; and “Gibborim be-yad chalashim.”

When we kindle, the mitzvah of Hanukkah is the praise itself, and that is what we speak of. Neither Ha-nerot halalu nor Al ha-nissim mentions the miracle of the flask of oil: the flask was later grafted onto the first miracle, that of the many delivered into the hands of the few, the impure into the hands of the pure, the wicked into the hands of those who hold fast to the Torah.

But there is an apparent repetition: saying that the mighty were delivered into the hands of the weak would have sufficed. What our Sages wished to convey is something else: this small number, holding firmly to the essence of the Law, saw itself as the sole bearer of the heritage of the fathers, and would in no way give it up. That the wicked should be delivered into the hands of the observant is, moreover, no reversal of the balance of power — it follows a logic.

The zeal of the Hasmoneans in searching for a flask of oil is not even mentioned. And in any case, in a state of impurity it was permitted to light the menorah: it could be done with any olive oil.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The miracle we prefer to tell is not always the one we give thanks for.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We gladly tell the stories that suit us and keep quiet about what truly saved us. In our family, what story is repeated at every festival — and what harder, truer part have we stopped telling?

The only tribal prince who brought nothing



PRESENTATION

At the inauguration of the sanctuary, each prince of a tribe brings his offering, one per day, twelve days of festivities. Only one was not designated: Aharon, for the tribe of Levi. He was hurt by it.

THE QUESTION

What does Aharon receive in exchange for the offering he was not asked for — and why is this compensation worth more than what he was denied?

THE ANSWER

The 25th of Kislev, the day the First Temple was inaugurated; the kindling of the menorah entrusted to Aharon ha-Kohen and his sons.

Aharon was hurt, and G-d said to him: take note, the Temple is destined to be destroyed. What the others bring will come to an end, one day or another. But you — what I shall give you is the kindling of the menorah. And that kindling will continue beyond the Temple, through the nights of exile — because it is through this spreading of light that the true destiny of Israel among the nations is fulfilled.

What endures in every Jewish home is not the sanctuary, nor the service of the sanctuary: it is the light of the menorah. It is this light that carries the holiness of Israel, through its lights, into every Jewish home.

And the light of Hanukkah comes on the 25th of Kislev, which is precisely the day the First Temple was inaugurated.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

What he was denied was destined to fall; what he was given still burns tonight on our tables.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Aharon thought he had been forgotten, and he was being given the one thing that would last. Who around this table felt set aside this year — in the family, at work? And if what they were refused is not what matters, what should we entrust to them instead?

“You are the ones who should be ashamed”



PRESENTATION

For three years and eight months, a decree requires every new bride to go to the governor before joining her husband. The daughter of Yochanan, the High Priest, is getting married. At the end of the celebration, she must go.

THE QUESTION

She tears her dress and stands naked before the scandalized gathering. Why does she turn the shame back on them, and not on herself?

THE ANSWER

They wanted to strip the Jewish people of its birthright: every new bride had first to be handed over to the governor of the city and give him her virginity before returning to her husband. It was an assault on the descendants of the Jewish people and on the purity of the woman.

The daughter of Yochanan Kohen Gadol was getting married, there was a celebration, and at the end of it she was to go to the governor. So she tore all her clothes, her wedding dress, and stood naked before the crowd. Her brothers and sisters, her family, the guests were scandalized. She said to them: listen, you are the ones who should be ashamed, because you let this happen. What does this mean? I, the daughter of the High Priest, am to go to the governor shortly — I will not go.

Thereupon the movement of revolt broke out, and the governor was killed. And that is why a woman, although this is a time-bound mitzvah, is obligated to kindle the lights: she was part of this miracle.

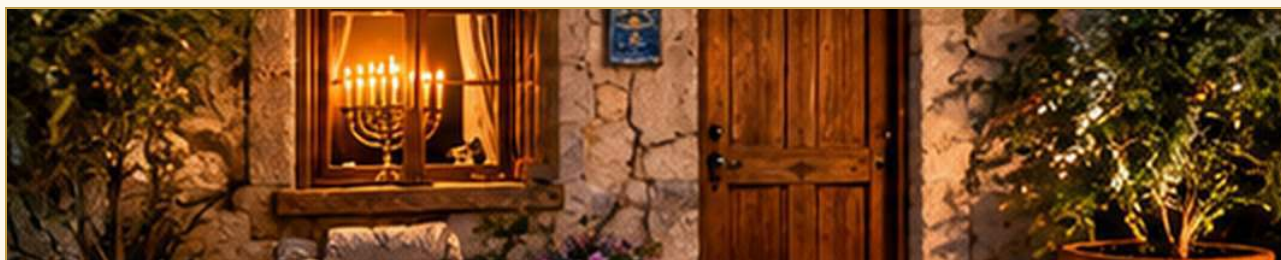
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The scandal was not what she showed, but what everyone agreed not to see.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

A young woman had to cause a scandal for her own family to stop putting up with the unacceptable. What have we learned to find normal because everyone goes along with it? And who at this table would have the courage to tear their dress?

No house, no light



PRESENTATION

The purpose of Hanukkah is to publicize the miracle. One might think everyone must kindle, everywhere. Yet the law exempts one who has no house, and exempts the traveller: the lights are kindled at his home, in his absence.

THE QUESTION

If the mitzvah is to spread the miracle, why tie it to a house — and why is one who has none exempt from it?

THE ANSWER

“Ner ish u-veito”; and the verse in Emor on pure olive oil for the lamp, placed right after the laws of Sukkot.

What is unique about Sukkot is this rediscovered intimacy with G-d, to whom we entrust our destiny beneath the clouds of glory. The light of Hanukkah springs from the same movement: the festival of Sukkot lasts eight days, and so does Hanukkah; on Sukkot we recite the full Hallel every day, and on Hanukkah as well. And in parashat Emor, immediately after the laws of Sukkot, comes the commandment of pure oil to keep the lamps burning continually, tended by Aharon from evening until morning.

The whole purpose of the sanctuary is to bear witness that the Eternal dwells in the heart of each person, in each one's intimacy. That is why one who has no house, who does not live this intimacy, who remains exposed to every current, is exempt from kindling. To give light, one must first live that intimacy intensely.

The light is placed at the threshold, opposite the mezuzah: beyond a life turned inward, we mean to share our light with the world — but gradually, without impudence, without arrogance, without seeking to colonize minds.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We can light up the outside only from an inside that holds firm.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Before seeking to light up the world, the law asks us to have a house. Does ours hold firm? What would we need to repair between us — a silence, a closed door — before claiming to give anything to the outside?

SUBJECT 10

Why “ner Hanukkah” and not “ner shel Hanukkah”



PRESENTATION

At the moment of the blessing, the Rokeach rules on a tiny nuance: we say “lehadlik ner Hanukkah,” not “ner shel Hanukkah.” Two letters fewer. The reason lies in a word those two letters would let slip away.

THE QUESTION

What word do we hear in “ner Hanukkah” that vanishes as soon as a “shel” is slipped in — and why does Greek thought threaten that word in particular?

THE ANSWER

The Rokeach: say “lehadlik ner Hanukkah,” not “ner shel Hanukkah.”

We must say “ner Hanukkah” simply in order to preserve the notion of nachal. Nachal means a river: the one that carries the waters from a given point toward distant lands. It is living water, pure water; it is not standing water, not static water.

Now, Greek thought sets boundaries to thought. And those boundaries are tum'ah, impurity: the moment you put a stopper somewhere, you have halted the flow, and that water accumulates impurities; it is no longer valid for a mikveh. It must be in constant motion.

Impurity is when matter does not release its energy, when it does not develop its potential, when it does not reach its ends. And that is precisely what “they defiled all the oils” means: all those lights that could have come from opaque matter and helped illuminate the world remained in their raw state.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

What brings impurity is not defilement; it is stagnation.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Water that no longer flows goes bad without anyone having soiled it. Where in our family life have we put a stopper — a question no longer asked, a subject we avoid? What, in our home, has stopped flowing this year?

SUBJECT 11

Four ways of giving, only one that lasts



PRESENTATION

Hanukkah is celebrated neither with a narrative like Pesach nor with a scroll like Purim. Almost nothing changes: the world goes on as usual. What remains is Hallel and Hoda'ah — praise and gratitude. And gratitude plays out in four ages.

THE QUESTION

What is the fourth stage of exchange, the one that is neither taking, nor bargaining, nor self-sacrifice — and why is it the one Hoda'ah calls for?

THE ANSWER

Our Sages: if all the offerings were to disappear, one alone would not, the korban todah; if all the prayers disappeared, that of Hoda'ah would remain.

There are four stages of exchange in life. The baby takes; it takes, that is all it knows, and when it is given nothing, it cries — and some people keep that philosophy all their lives. The growing child is able to give, but on conditions: it is threatened or rewarded, and exchange becomes a calculation of interest. Then comes the third stage, idealism: the adolescent wants to change the world, he only gives and gives, ready to give without receiving anything — and that does not last.

The fourth stage is to be mekabel in order to be able to give: to receive in order to pass on. That is how the Jewish people understands its spiritual life. It received the Torah, but it will not keep it jealously, selfishly, for itself: it will be able to share it.

Todah comes from the gesture of giving one's hand, of lending a hand to another. This gratitude is the struggle against “kochi ve-otzem yadi,” it is my strength that did all this. Whoever claims that, his life is a hell: there comes a time when strength grows old, when one realizes one depends on others. Then comes the word: todah.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Saying thank you is not lowering oneself: it is recognizing that one has received the means to give.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

At this table there are people who give without ever knowing how to receive, and others who receive without ever giving back. Let each person honestly place themselves in one of the four ages — and say what they would need to move on to the next.

SUBJECT 12

The light the world could not bear



PRESENTATION

The first thing created was light. The world could not bear it, and it was withdrawn, stored away. Yet we kindle at nightfall, in that glow which is no longer day and not yet night.

THE QUESTION

Why could the world not bear the primordial light — and where was it stored away?

THE ANSWER

“Gnuzah la-tzaddikim le-atid lavo” — He stored it away for the righteous, for the time to come.

The world could not bear it because there were not yet any tzaddikim, not yet any righteous in whom it could be deposited, stored away. So He kept it for the righteous, in the heart of the righteous. This means that this light exists in each person, in each righteous one: it is there, and it is simply a matter of stirring it and giving it the chance to shine.

Hanukkah is ner ish u-veito: the light that belongs to each person, displayed before everyone. We do not hide it, we want to share it, and yet it is our own, it is particular to us. It is an essence, and an essence does not diminish: the anointing oil served to anoint the vessels and to anoint kings, and it did not diminish; it remained the same.

When we kindle at the threshold of the house, it is a way of saying: here is the primordial light, created beyond these worlds that persecuted us, and which we carry through time. It does not have the same intensity in everyone — but everyone has it.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It does not have the same intensity in all, but no one is without it.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each person here carries a light that no one can take away, and that no one else can kindle in their place. Let each guest name the light they recognize in their neighbour at the table — and listen to what is recognized in them.