

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

SHAVUOT

11 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Festive Table

Eleven questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Shavuot: The Festival of Oaths”: how to mark a festival that has
no distinctive feature, why the word for weeks also means oath,
why G-d cast truth to the ground, and how David and Ruth the
Moabite made prayer a gateway to the Torah.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

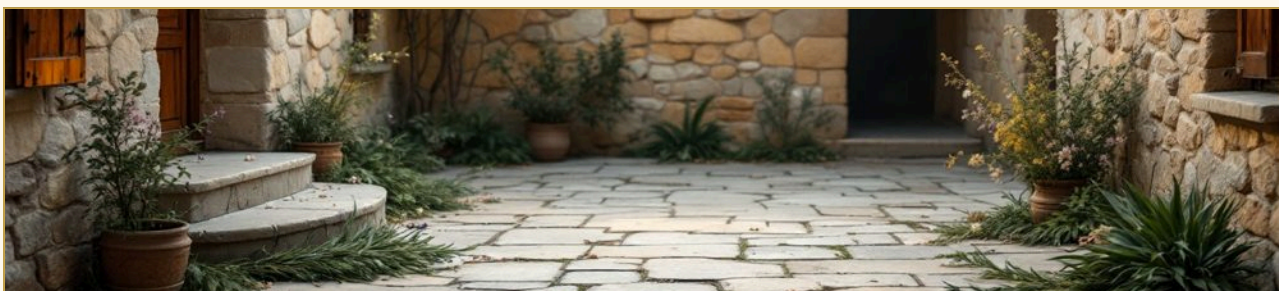
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Themes for reflection and questions to share around the Shavuot table

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SUBJECT 01

A Festival With No Distinctive Feature



PRESENTATION

Pesach has matzah, Sukkot the sukkah, Rosh Hashanah the shofar. Shavuot has no outward sign, no spectacular rite, no object to take hold of. The Rav starts from this observation: how do we mark a day that has no distinctive feature?

THE QUESTION

If Shavuot gives us nothing to do, what does it ask of us?

THE ANSWER

“To proclaim Your kindness in the morning, and Your faithfulness in the nights” (Tehillim 92:3).

How are we to mark this day? Through a commitment of self: in the reality of oneself, in the reality of creation, in the reality of the Creator. It is somewhat complicated: who would want to, or could, give proof of his own existence? Does my presence need proof? Could I be reduced to total negation, as many peoples have wished for the Jewish people?

There are two great dimensions in time, equal to one another when all the days and seasons are added up: one half in which we are exposed to broad daylight, another in which we are in total absence, the night of time. In life as in history, these two phases exist.

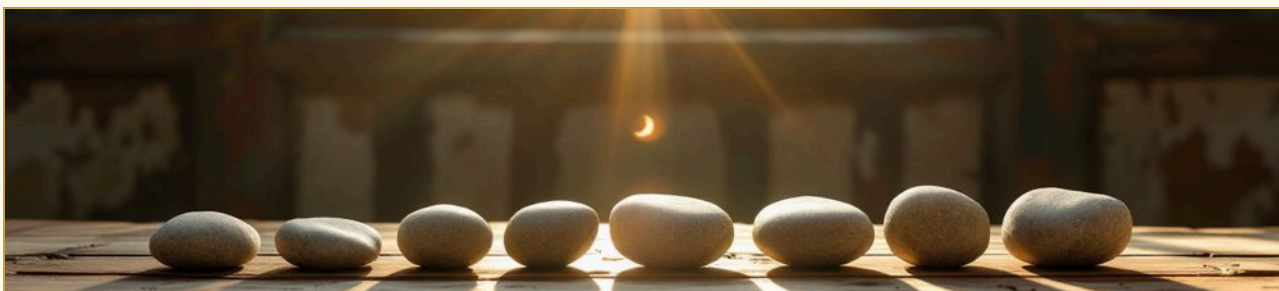
By day, we manifest our existence through kindness, through the giving of ourselves. And when we are reduced to the shadows of night, it is our faith that truly bears witness to what we are.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There are “daytime” periods, when one can act and give, and “night-time” periods, when only trust remains. Which one are we in right now? What, during our nights, bore witness to who we are?

SUBJECT 02

The Week, a Time That Nature Does Not Impose



PRESENTATION

Time has four movements: the day, the week, the month and the year. The sun governs the day and the year, the moon governs the month. The week depends on no heavenly body. Yet it is the week that gives its name to Shavuot, the festival of weeks.

THE QUESTION

Why does the festival bear the name of the one unit of time that nature does not impose?

THE ANSWER

“Who has not made me a slave” — a blessing said every morning.

Just as there is a structure of seven in space — the four cardinal points, heaven, earth and the center — there are seven points in the structure of time: none can be reduced to another; it is the whole that makes the unity. The week belongs to creation without depending on any natural phenomenon: in it one undertakes something and brings it to completion, before starting something else.

Every morning, we say: He has not made me a slave. Why every day? Because each day is a new creation: my identity, my nature, my potential are never equal to yesterday's. The month, for its part, is something I sanctify: a call to renewal that I do not undergo but lay claim to.

And the Omer is not counted from Sunday, as it would have to be if it were tied to creation, but from the day after Pesach. It is the structure of our time, that of discovering our own reality.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

I am never the person of yesterday or the day before.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Our days are imposed on us; our weeks we can build. What project would each of us like to “bring to completion” before next Shabbat? And what have we changed in ourselves since yesterday?

Neither Sin Nor Repentance Was Foreseen



PRESENTATION

The year ends with curses, and we feel the need to erase, to start over. The Rav adds a surprising remark: certain things were not foreseen in creation. And this thread leads to David.

THE QUESTION

If repentance was not foreseen in creation, where does it come from — and why does it lead to King David?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “Sin is something man does.”

Sin was not foreseen in creation. Nor was repentance: if there is no sin, there is no room for repentance. Sin is something man does; and repentance is something for which man felt an intense need.

The one who gave repentance its particular brilliance is King David. There may be moments of straying, there may be sin; but there is repentance, and its master builder is David HaMelech. This is a first thread linking Shavuot to the king of Israel.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Repentance is not a mechanism set up in advance: it is a need man feels. Did we feel the need this year to “redo” something? What helps us move from regret to a real return?

The Festival of Weeks or the Festival of Oaths?



PRESENTATION

To name this day, tradition chose neither the day of first fruits, nor the harvest festival, nor even the giving of the Torah: it chose the counting of the weeks. Yet seven, sheva, gave rise to another word: shevuah, the oath.

THE QUESTION

If the word that names the festival means both week and oath, what oath is sworn on the fiftieth day — and who swears it to whom?

THE ANSWER

“That is why the place was called Be’er Sheva, for there the two of them swore an oath” (Bereshit 21:31).

Avraham sets apart seven ewes to conclude the covenant with Avimelech, and the place is called Be’er Sheva, because there the two of them swore an oath. Shavuot would thus be not only the festival of weeks, but the festival of oaths: that of G-d, who pledges never to exchange this people for another, and that of Israel, which pledges to remain attached to its Creator through the Torah.

Yet when I say “I swear”, Hebrew does not use an active verb: nishba is a passive, I am sworn, as nishmar means I am guarded. I am moved by my own reality as a creature: I did not decide to come into the world. My own reality belongs to me only insofar as I am willing to take it in hand.

I could be a passive element in this creation; I could, on the contrary, be an active element. But in any case, I already belong to an oath that has been given, that of creation itself, which took place independently of me.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We chose neither our birth, nor our family, nor our people: we are committed in advance. Let each one name the commitment he did not choose and ended up embracing. Where, this year, did we remain passive when we should have been active?

G-d Cast Truth to the Ground



PRESENTATION

When G-d wished to create man, the ministering angels were alarmed. In the name of truth, of coexistence, they objected that man is nothing but falsehood and violence, and that the world would not endure. So G-d cast truth to the ground, and created man.

THE QUESTION

How can the Creator cast His own seal, truth, to the ground to make room for man?

THE ANSWER

The debate of the angels before the creation of man (Bereshit Rabbah 8:5).

Hesed pleaded in man's favor; strict judgment opposed him. The angels are taken aback: G-d casts His seal, which is truth, to the ground. And He answers: I have not decided that truth should be imposed from above, unrelated to human beings; I want it to be man who extracts the truth from the darkness of this world. And that will be the Oral Law.

The Written Law will not move: it is there, it is uncompromising, it cannot be touched. The Oral Law, however, is debated: it is precisely the place where man extracts the truth.

Shavuot is the day on which man carries out his own creation. He no longer wants to remain in a creation made independently of him, without his knowledge; he gives himself a reality of his own. And since the Exodus from Egypt, he has been counting his own structure of seven in time.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

I want truth to be the work of man.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We like truths that fall from above: they spare us the search. On what subject, in this home, have we preferred to receive the rule rather than understand it? What should we, this year, extract ourselves instead of waiting for it ready-made?

The Beginning Contains Everything



PRESENTATION

The counting of the Omer leads to the fiftieth day. The Rav links this day to two words: kol, the whole, whose value is fifty, and reshit, the beginning, the first fruits — the very ones that were brought on Shavuot.

THE QUESTION

Why is what we aim for — the whole — already present in the beginning?

THE ANSWER

Kol, the whole: kaf (20) and lamed (30), making fifty.

What I aim for is totality, the kol. The ultimate end lies outside the count: it is the goal, what I wanted to reach. The counting of the weeks brings me to the tachlit, the final project, where I receive the Torah. For the Torah is given; it must still be learned, taken on, and that is the whole secret of the festival.

In the reshit, in the first fruits, all the rest is already contained: the rest is only an unfolding of the embryo, of the source. The reshit is not counted, because it is a totality; it merely spreads out its components. The Torah, Israel, creation, the bikkurim are all called reshit.

What matters on the day of Shavuot is to connect to this beginning. That is why our sages instituted the Shema morning and evening: it corresponds to the minimal study of Torah, and one who has no time to discover himself through the Torah discovers himself in the Shema Yisrael.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The ultimate end is not counted; it is not part of the count.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

First gestures often contain everything that follows: a first word to a child, a first mitzvah, a first Shabbat. Which “beginning” in our family already holds everything we have become? To which should we connect again?

Why Do We Close Our Eyes to Say Echad?



PRESENTATION

It is customary to close one's eyes when reciting the Shema. Then, right after proclaiming Echad, one adds a second sentence in an undertone, about kingship. The two go together, and we no longer always know why.

THE QUESTION

What do we see with our eyes closed that we did not see with them open — and why must we immediately speak of a king?

THE ANSWER

“Hear, O Israel, the L-rd is our G-d, the L-rd is One” (Devarim 6:4).

Before the Shema, our vision is fragmented: different elements of creation that we do not know how to combine into a whole. When we have said Echad, we open our eyes onto a world of Echad. Yet Echad is translated as “one”, and that is not its first meaning: the one is the unification of all the elements. Within this one are all the others; the whole is included in it.

That is why a second sentence immediately enjoins us not to separate any element: blessed be the name of the glory of His kingdom. There is a difference between moshel and melech: the moshel governs by coercion — that is dictatorship; the melech is chosen, and the one who chooses him is as important as the king, since the king owes him his recognition.

This is the commandment that the Rambam places second in his count of the mitzvot. Shavuot is the day on which we acknowledge our King, recognize ourselves in Him, and make sure that no element remains outside.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

To dissociate any element from the whole is equivalent to idolatry.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In a family as in a community, there is always someone left outside — because he is disturbing, because he thinks differently. Who, this year, remained outside the circle? Do we want to be “king” of those who resemble us, or of everyone?

Seventy Years Given by Adam



PRESENTATION

Shavuot is the day of the death of David HaMelech, and from it we deduce the day of his birth. The Rav recalls where his seventy years of life came from: a gift from the first man.

THE QUESTION

Why did David, whose life had been set at a few hours, become the king of Israel par excellence?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “In his reign, what he sought was to gather in all the lost sheep.”

We do not know the day of David's birth, but we know the day of his death; and from it we deduce the other, because the life of the righteous is a whole: a complete cycle, from birth to death, which is a second birth. A structure of seventy years.

David received these years from Adam HaRishon. The generations were made to pass before the first man, with the personalities of each. He saw that David would have a life of only three hours, and he said: I give him seventy years of my life.

David is the acknowledged king of Israel, the one who sat on the throne of G-d. Why? Because in his reign, he sought to gather in all the lost elements. That is why the day on which no element must remain outside is associated with both his birth and his death.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

David lived thanks to years given by another. Who has “given us of his life” — time, strength, years — so that we could be what we are? And which lost sheep could we, in turn, bring back?

SUBJECT 09

“And I Am Prayer”



PRESENTATION

David says of himself: “And I am prayer.” He composed five books of Psalms, which correspond to the five books of the Torah. For the Rav, it is no coincidence that David is celebrated on the day the Torah was given.

THE QUESTION

Why is prayer necessary to gain access to the Torah?

THE ANSWER

“And I am prayer” (Tehillim 109:4).

Access to the Torah, so as truly to absorb it, requires extraordinary help from HaKadosh Baruch Hu. Unless He grants us wisdom and the ability to understand, we would long remain impervious to His teaching.

And what makes access to the Torah easier? Prayer. The one who said of himself “I am prayer” is David HaMelech. He composed five books corresponding to the five books of the Torah: he provided their complement.

David placed himself above the rigor of study, the rigor of the Torah, and through prayer he made it possible to rediscover the secrets of the Torah.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Do we pray before we study, or do we study the way one reads a file? Which passage of the Torah “spoke” to us only after we had prayed it or sung it? And which psalm would each of us like to share tonight?

SUBJECT 10

Moav, David's Shame



PRESENTATION

When David seeks to trace his lineage, he comes upon the most difficult origin imaginable: the daughters of Lot, and the elder who names her son Moav, “from father”. Then the daughters of Moav, who tried to dissolve the Jewish people in the desert.

THE QUESTION

How can a people that embraces all of humanity in its gaze refuse to melt into the masses?

THE ANSWER

“The elder bore a son and called him Moav” (Bereshit 19:37).

David comes, says the Rav, from the most repugnant origin, and it was his shame. He finds the daughters of Lot, and the brazenness of the elder, who proclaims in the very name of the child that he is from her father. Ruth is a Moabite, and she is David's ancestress.

The daughters of Moav are the ones who tried to dissolve the Jewish people through marriages, when Bilam, in the name of universal values, wanted the people to melt into the masses.

Yet the Jewish people has an overall view of the entire universe, of all humanity; but it does not want to put itself into a machinery in which it risks being strangled by the masses. That is the meaning of the census in Bamidbar.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

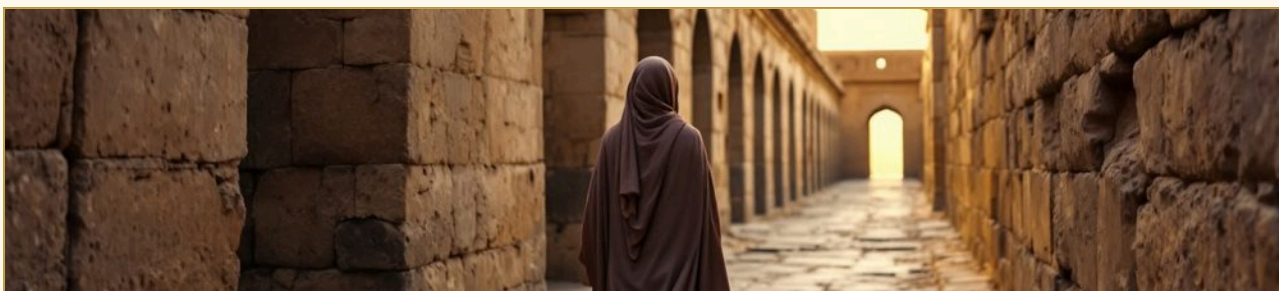
Quality must be asserted before seeking multiplication and quantity at any cost.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Being open to the world without dissolving into it: that is an everyday balancing act. In what areas do we let ourselves be “strangled by the masses” — fashions, opinions, habits? And where, on the contrary, is our openness a strength?

SUBJECT 11

Ruth Passed Through the Gates of Understanding



PRESENTATION

Moav has the numerical value forty-nine. Now there are forty-nine gates of understanding — and, says the Rav, as many gates of folly. Ruth the Moabite carried this heritage over from one side to the other.

THE QUESTION

What strength enabled Ruth to transform what came from Moav — and what does her name say?

THE ANSWER

Moav: mem (40), vav (6), alef (1), bet (2) = 49; “Ruth, for from her came forth David, who sated the Holy One, blessed be He, with songs and praises” (Berachot 7b).

Just as there are forty-nine degrees of purity, there are forty-nine of impurity; as many sha'arei binah, gates of understanding, as gates of folly. Ruth's strength is the power of conversion of the Torah, which led her through the gates of intelligence and understanding.

Her name comes from the fact that she sated HaKadosh Baruch Hu — not with words of Torah, but with prayer. That is why we recall the presence of Ruth on the day of Shavuot.

For to gain access to the deep values of the Torah, we need this prayer, which has within it the power to overturn everything and turn curse into blessing.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The least glorious part of what we inherited can become a gateway to the best. Which “difficult” trait in our family could be turned into a strength? And which prayer helped us to do it?