

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

SHAVUOT

10 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Festive Table

Ten questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Shavuot: The Fiftieth Day, Beyond the Count”: why the festival
of the present has no date, why the fiftieth day is not counted,
what wheat has lost since Adam, and what it means to encamp “as
one man, with one heart”.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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Themes for reflection and questions to share around the Shavuot table

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A Festival Without a Date



PRESENTATION

Pesach falls on the 15th of Nissan, Sukkot on the 15th of Tishrei. Shavuot has no date of its own: it falls on the 5th, 6th or 7th of Sivan depending on the length of the preceding months. And nowhere does the Torah mention the giving of the Torah as the reason for this festival.

THE QUESTION

How can the festival that celebrates the people's founding event have neither a fixed date nor any mention of that event in the text?

THE ANSWER

The names of the festival in the Torah: Chag HaShavuot, the festival of weeks; Chag HaKatzir, the festival of the harvest; Yom HaBikkurim, the day of first fruits.

The three pilgrimage festivals celebrate three times. Pesach is the past: each generation must see itself as coming out of Egypt. Sukkot is the future, the messianic project in which all peoples will gather under a single sukkah. And the one that celebrates the present is Shavuot — that is why it has no precise date. It is simply the culmination of the counting of the Omer.

If we attach the giving of the Torah to it, it is because our sages said that the fiftieth day completes our creation. Man was formed from the earth, then G-d breathed into him the breath of life: that is the second stage. There are two creations in man: that of this world, perishable, and this divine breath, imperishable. The Torah of Shavuot is the embodiment of this breath in a people freshly emerged from the Egyptian clay.

So it is not a matter of celebrating an anniversary, but of taking up this breath again in its original purity, and sharing it with others.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is the present that prepares this future.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Whatever we date, we file away. What did we file away this year in an anniversary so as not to have to live it anymore: a promise, a commitment? And what, in our home, must remain without a date — that is, to be taken up again every day?

SUBJECT 02

The Self That Will Not Be Counted



PRESENTATION

At the Exodus from Egypt, says the Rav, we inaugurated another time, our own. He connects it to a small word: ani, the self. The self that G-d Himself uses to reveal Himself, and that each of us would like to see respected.

THE QUESTION

What is it in us that refuses to be reduced to a number — and where does this self draw its strength from?

THE ANSWER

Hillel: “If I am here, everything is here.”

We inaugurated a time that is ours, which we are called to master and renew. Because we do not belong to the time of the creation of the universe, we are a people outside of time: the wear of time has no hold on us. We are still here.

Just as HaKadosh Baruch Hu uses ani, the self, to say that He cannot be reduced to any other reality, each of us aspires to this “I am who I am”. I do not accept being reduced to a number, to a serial number, to being added up with others.

This uniqueness draws its sap from the Torah, which cannot be reduced to creation since it preceded it: this world is only its negative. The letter of creation is the bet, duality; that of uniqueness is the alef, with which the revelation begins: Anochi. The whole task consists in bringing dualities back to unity.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

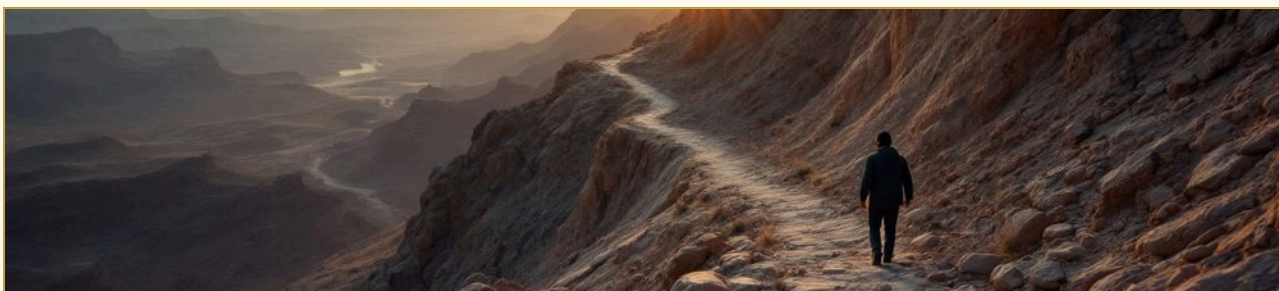
I am unique, unique in what I represent.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Where do we feel reduced to a number: at school, at work, before an administration? And do we ourselves sometimes reduce a loved one to his role, his grade, his salary? What would it take for each one at this table to feel “wholly here”?

SUBJECT 03

Given at Sinai, Received on Yom Kippur



PRESENTATION

Our sages call Shavuot Atzeret, the closing of Pesach, just as Shemini Atzeret closes Sukkot. But for the Rav, the revelation took place in two stages: the Torah was given at Sinai, and it was truly received only on the day of Kippur.

THE QUESTION

Why did it take two stages to receive the Torah — and what had to be eliminated in between?

THE ANSWER

“There shall be no strange god within you” (Tehillim 81:10).

We were given the Torah at Mount Sinai, but we did not receive it: we did not fully accept it, did not fully integrate it. We finally received it on the day of Kippur, when the second Tablets of the Law were handed to us.

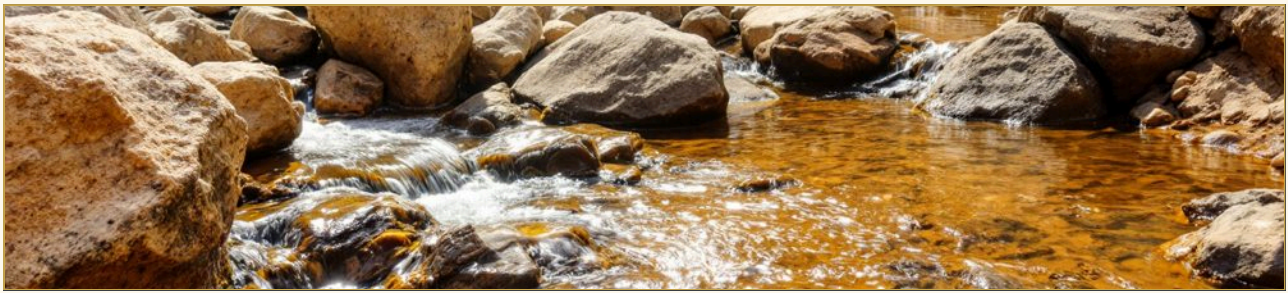
On that day, we had agreed to wipe the slate clean of everything that dug a gulf between us and our neighbor, between us and our Creator. We had eliminated el zar, the strange god — el is strength. We had to set aside that self-assertion that overrides the humility we must acknowledge before G-d.

For before G-d, we are servants. Just as the world must obey laws, or else it does not function, man needs a structure that governs him and helps him fulfil himself by himself. That law is the Torah, at the origin of the creation of the universe as of the definitive conception of the Jewish people.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Receiving and truly accepting are not the same thing. Which teaching, which piece of advice, have we “received” without integrating it? And what gulf — with someone close — would need to be bridged so that we can finally receive it?

Forty-Nine, Both Ways



PRESENTATION

Before Shavuot we read parashat Bechukotai and its curses; before Rosh Hashanah, Ki Tavo, which has twice as many. The Rav pauses on this number, forty-nine, and on the two letters that write it: mem and tet.

THE QUESTION

Why can the same number lead to clarity or to confusion — and which letter makes the difference?

THE ANSWER

Tam, mat: forty-nine; tahor, pure, and tamei, impure.

In parashat Bechukotai, read before Shavuot, there are forty-nine curses; in Ki Tavo, which precedes Rosh Hashanah, ninety-eight: twice forty-nine. Why? Because if we reach Rosh Hashanah without having taken in the first warning, we find ourselves facing two series.

These two letters can be read in both directions. There are forty-nine ways of treating a problem objectively, in purity of mind, tahor; and forty-nine ways of darkening it, muddling it, confusing it, tamei. One can play on both planes and show that they feed on the same source.

Tamei is these same letters, plus an alef. And the alef is the fiftieth: it stands outside the forty-nine, outside this square of seven.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The same discussion can enlighten or muddle. Think of a subject that divides our family: did we approach it “to understand” or “to be right”? What would bring us over to the other side?

The Fiftieth Day Is Not Counted



PRESENTATION

We count forty-nine days from the day after Pesach. The fiftieth does not enter the count: it is never counted. The Rav sees in this the key to Shavuot — and the reason for the two obstacles that keep us from reaching it.

THE QUESTION

Why is the day that gives meaning to the whole count precisely the one we do not count?

THE ANSWER

The prayer of Rabbi Alexandri: “Who prevents us? The leaven in the dough and subjugation to the kingdoms” (Berachot 17a).

The fiftieth lies outside the seven weeks, outside this square of seven, forty-nine. That is why it is not counted: this time can be reduced neither to the twenty-four-hour day nor to a day of the sefirah. Sefar means a limit, a calculation, a border. To cross that border is to find oneself in a state of total transparency: one looks at things, but through them.

Rabbi Alexandri, when he finished his prayer, would say: Master of the world, we want at all costs to conform to Your will; but the leaven in the dough prevents us, and the grip of the kingdoms. These are the two scourges that keep man on a leash and prevent him from revealing his self.

Babel created confusion, a tohu in the life of humanity: people lost the sharpness of their vision and their thought. Egypt was the first to impose subjugation. Either our thought feeds on several sources without distinction and remains in confusion, or we sell ourselves to keep a certain standard of living.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We have gone beyond the sefar, we have gone beyond the limit.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We count many things: years, income, successes. Let each one name what he never counts because it is his goal. And which of the two scourges holds us: the confusion of the sources we draw from, or the standard of living we do not want to lose?

Wheat Was a Tree



PRESENTATION

Ezra regarded Shavuot as a “head of the year”, because on it we are judged on the fruit of the tree. And our sages say that in Adam's time, wheat grew like a palm tree: it was the tree of knowledge. Since then, it has become a seed that one sows.

THE QUESTION

What did Adam cause the world to lose by bringing the tree down to the rank of a seed?

THE ANSWER

“On Atzeret, the world is judged for the fruit of the tree” (Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:2).

To say head of the year is to say that everything follows the head, the root, the source, and that the rest is only its extension. If we are judged on Shavuot on the fruit of the tree, it is because man's reason suffered from the fruit of the first tree, which he abused.

What is the difference between a tree and a seed? From a tree, you take the fruit, you eat it, but the capital is still there: it will produce again next year. You have kept the capital and taken the fruit. A seed, once you have eaten it, must be replanted; you have to sow again.

Now the tree of knowledge lost its stature, because knowledge must not be reduced to good and bad, but must distinguish the sacred from the profane, the true from the false. This man did not understand; he did not take it in. The tree became *pri ha'adamah*, a fruit of the ground.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It became a fruit of the ground, where in the end everything is lost and one must start all over again.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In a life there is what is passed on and still bears fruit, and what must be started over in every generation. Let each one say what he received as “capital” and has not touched. And what have we reduced to a seed that must now be resown every year?

The Tree and Counsel



PRESENTATION

Etz, the tree; etzah, counsel. Our sages link the two words. And they say that Avraham found the truth thanks to his kidneys, which counseled him. The Rav reads in this a lesson on what truly integrated knowledge is.

THE QUESTION

Why must knowledge be “filtered” to become a tree of life?

THE ANSWER

“She is a tree of life to those who grasp her” (Mishlei 3:18).

How did Avraham reach the truth? Through his kelayot, his kidneys, which gave him counsel. Just as the kidneys filter the blood and its impurities, knowledge must be filtered for its sap to be found in its purity. That is why the Torah is a tree of life, a counsel of life, for all who uphold it.

Wheat is da'at. Our sages say that a child learns to call his father and mother only after having eaten grain of wheat. Chochmah and binah remain abstract until they have been filtered into da'at, the knowledge integrated by man. That is also why the Shavuot offering is of wheat, the food of man, whereas the day after Pesach it was of barley, considered animal fodder.

Likewise in human qualities: between the urge to project oneself entirely onto the other and the urge to internalize everything, a balance, an equilibrium, must be maintained.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We accumulate a great deal of information; how much of it have we truly “digested”? What did we learn this year that changed our conduct, and not just our ideas? Whom do we ask for counsel when the true must be filtered from the false?

The Shofar Is Not a Musical Instrument



PRESENTATION

The shofar sounded at Sinai, growing ever louder. It also sounds in the fiftieth year, the jubilee. The Rav points out a detail: a shofar is never put into an orchestra.

THE QUESTION

Why is the sound of the shofar, which blends with no other, the one that calls each person back to his source?

THE ANSWER

“You shall proclaim liberty throughout the land... each man shall return to his property, each man to his family” (Vayikra 25:10).

The shofar is not put into an orchestra to accompany the other instruments and take part in a symphony. Its sound is connected to nothing. Just as the self does not melt into any ensemble, the shofar lends itself to no blend.

This shofar invites everyone to return. When seven times seven shemitot have been counted, one reaches the fiftieth year, the yovel: each must return to his family, to his property, to his root, to his source. It is the divine breath no longer confined, either by the confusion of ideas or by subjugation to the kingdoms.

Even the slave who says: I love my master, my wife, my children, I do not want to go free, will not remain a slave forever. At the jubilee, he must go out no matter what, because this renouncing of control over himself is not granted to him. He must take himself back.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The shofar is a sound that remains independent.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There are moments when we need a voice that does not blend into the surrounding concert. Do we have, in our family, such a “shofar” — someone or something that calls us back to our source? And what have we remained a slave to “out of attachment”?

SUBJECT 09

Ships With No Buyer



PRESENTATION

Among the curses of Ki Tavo is a strange image: the L-rd will bring you back to Egypt in ships, you will sell yourselves to your enemies, and there will be no buyer. One commentary reads in oniyot, ships, another word: ani, the self.

THE QUESTION

What does it mean to seek to “sell” one’s self — and why is there no buyer?

THE ANSWER

“The L-rd will bring you back to Egypt in ships... you will sell yourselves to your enemies... and there will be no buyer” (Devarim 28:68).

These oniyot are the ani, the self that each person has lost. You will try to sell it, to sell it to your enemies. But there is no buyer, no purchaser: nobody wants it.

It is the subjugation that Egypt was the first to turn into a system: selling oneself to keep a certain standard of living, becoming the servant of others instead of remaining a servant of Hashem. Yet a child of Israel cannot be sold as a slave.

And when the woman of valor is praised, it is said that she is “like the merchant’s ships”. She has the intuitive strength to change her self at any moment; but she uses it only to furnish her home, build her house, ensure the well-being of her husband and children.

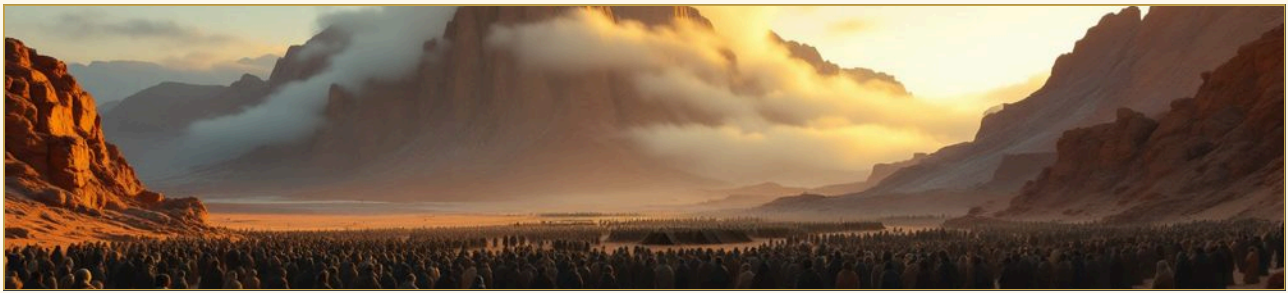
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Nobody wants it. You will be obliged to return to yourself.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We sometimes “sell” a little of ourselves to be accepted, to please, to keep up a standard of living. In what area do we feel we have sold ourselves? And what would make us “return to ourselves”?

As One Man, With One Heart



PRESENTATION

At the foot of Sinai, Israel encamps “as one man, with one heart”. This is often taken as praise of fusion. The Rav reads this unity differently, and clarifies what the Torah means when it speaks in the plural or in the singular.

THE QUESTION

Does being “one man” mean that each one melted into the crowd?

THE ANSWER

“Israel encamped there”: as one man, with one heart (Rashi on Shemot 19:2).

No: it does not mean that they all merged into one. It means that each one learned to step back somewhat before the other, so that it might truly be a tzibbur, a gathered, assembled whole.

That is why our sages say that when the Torah speaks in the plural, it addresses each member of the community; but when it speaks in the singular, it addresses the constituted whole. And the constituted whole is the one in which each person asserts his self through the breath that is his own.

We are searching for this self, with an inner shofar, that of the giving of the Torah; but now it must be realized individually — and it is by stepping back a little that each one makes the whole possible.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Each one withdrew to give reality to the other.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Around this table, who takes up a lot of room, and who steps back? To form “one heart”, from what could each one step back a little tonight — without disappearing?