

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

SHAVUOT

12 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Festive Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Shavuot: The Book of Ruth and Hesed”: why, on the day the
Law was given, we read a scroll without a single law, why
Elimelech's departure is a sin, how the sages opened the door to
Ruth the Moabite, and what a Torah reduced to its narrowest
sense is worth.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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Themes for reflection and questions to share around the Shavuot table

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A Scroll Without a Single Law



PRESENTATION

Five scrolls are spread across the year: the Song of Songs on Pesach, Kohelet on Sukkot, Esther on Purim, Lamentations on the Ninth of Av. Each time, the link with the festival is obvious. On Shavuot, we read Ruth — and the link is much less so.

THE QUESTION

Why, on the day the Law was given, do we read the one book that has no law in it?

THE ANSWER

Rabbi Zeira: this megillah contains neither pure nor impure, neither forbidden nor permitted; it was written only to teach the greatness of those who practice hesed (Ruth Rabbah 2:14).

The Torah's credential is first of all hesed. When Moshe presented himself at Sinai to receive the Torah, the angels objected: what is this son of man doing among us? And G-d clothed Moshe with the face of Avraham: how can you refuse him? He opened his door to you when you were disguised as travelers, he served you, you ate in his home — and today you contest him? That is ingratitude.

One who seeks only strict justice, strict halachah, has not penetrated the deep meaning of the Torah. Our sages even went so far as to say of a certain rule: yes, that is the rule, but we do not teach it that way. And the judge must consider each situation without comparing one case to another: each time it is different.

The Torah is also the measure of din, it is true: for the community, the measure of justice is needed. But for the individual, for life in community, the measure of hesed is needed.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The Torah's credential is first of all hesed.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We all know how to invoke the rule when it suits us. Where, this year, did we apply the rule to someone instead of looking at him? And to whom must we, before the festival ends, return the measure of hesed rather than that of law?

Avraham Left, Yaakov Left — Why Is Elimelech Condemned?



PRESENTATION

“In the days when the judges judged” — that is, says the Rav, in the days when the judges were judged: no king, a corrupt justice, then famine. A wealthy man, whose house could have fed the population for ten years, then leaves the land to settle in Moav.

THE QUESTION

If the same departure is permitted to Avraham and encouraged for Yaakov, why does it become a sin for Elimelech?

THE ANSWER

“A man of Beit Lechem went to sojourn in the fields of Moav” (Ruth 1:1); to Yaakov: “Do not fear to go down to Egypt” (Bereshit 46:3).

There are three reasons for which one may leave the land: to find a wife, to go to a master to study, or because one cannot make a living. That is permitted. For Avraham, it is accepted and even rewarded; for Yaakov, it is encouraged, since G-d promises to bring him back up.

But there is one term for going toward this land and another for leaving it: going up and going down. To go up to Israel is to care about one's elevation; to leave it is to make a yeridah, a descent. One who is aware of this will do everything to return: the crisis forced him, it will be temporary. Avraham is aware of his descent. Of Elimelech, the text says that they were there: they invested their whole existence there.

And the risk, when one takes one's family off to some forsaken corner of exile, is spiritual death: the children go looking for foreign wives, the family crumbles. That is exactly what happens. In the first verse, the text does not even name him, so secretly does he act: those who knocked at his door no longer find him.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Of Elimelech it is not said that he goes down: he settles there for good.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There are departures we own up to and departures we disguise as settling in. What have we drifted away from this year, telling ourselves it was temporary? And who, today, knocks at our door and no longer finds us there?

A Torah Given in the Desert



PRESENTATION

From Elimelech's departure, the Rav draws a reflection on the bond between the Torah and the land. The Torah can be fully observed only in Israel. And yet it was not given in Israel, but in a desert that belongs to no one.

THE QUESTION

Why was the Torah, bound to a land, given in a place that belongs to no one?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “Elsewhere, it is only a GPS.”

The Torah is complete in its observance only in Israel. Elsewhere, it is only a GPS, a Waze: it shows us the way, it reminds us of the order, and it allows us to preserve the unity of the people. To practice the mitzvot abroad is a way of identifying with my people, of being in communion with it.

But it was given in the desert, the place of the word, the place of communion between being and the absolute. The Torah is bound to a land, but it is not the product of a land, nor of a condition: that is the principle of its universality. It was offered to the other nations, who did not accept it because they were not sufficiently ready.

For the Torah demands that one pass through continual trials: that is where the spiritual identity of a person is forged. At Sinai, it came in the measure of each person, and each perceived it according to his capacities.

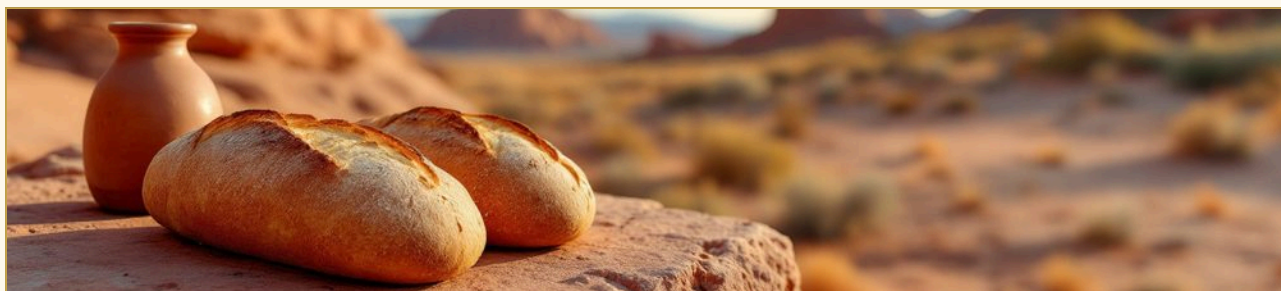
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

A minimum is required — to be free, to be emancipated — to gain access to the teaching of the Torah.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Wherever we live, the Torah shows us a way. Let each one say what, in his practice, is simply “GPS” — keeping the connection — and what is true commitment. Which trial this year forged something in us?

Moav: Too Little Bread, Too Much Kindness



PRESENTATION

The Torah forbids the Moabite forever from entering the community, whereas it decrees nothing of the kind for the Egyptian who enslaved the people. And yet Moav was born of an excess of kindness. Ruth comes from there.

THE QUESTION

Why is Moav excluded for refusing bread — and what becomes of hesed when it no longer has any bounds?

THE ANSWER

“Because they did not meet you with bread and water on the way, when you came out of Egypt” (Devarim 23:5).

They refused to provide the water and bread that the people were ready to pay for, on the very eve of entering the promised land, when they already wanted to bar the way. This is the anti-hesed, the opposite of Avraham, whose attribute is hesed, love.

Yet Moav descends from Lot, who had followed Avraham and inherited his kindness. He chose Sodom, where life was good, where a justice was established, but where neither charity nor kindness was known: everyone had to fend for himself. Lot, for his part, welcomes the messengers, and the whole city rises up. He had stayed at the entrance of the city; even so, one gets carried away by one's surroundings.

His daughters, believing themselves alone in the world, want to found a family with their own father: a hesed without limits becomes an abominable act, for kindness must have bounds. But the intention remains, and through filtering upon filtering across the generations, it reappears. Ma'aseh avot siman labanim: what the fathers do marks the children.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

No good act in itself will ever be entirely lost: one day or another, it will find where to be grafted.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What we allow ourselves, even in secret, marks our children; but a good deed is never lost. Which deed of our grandparents still bears fruit among us? And what kindness, in our home, would need some bounds?

A New Being, Not a Repaired One



PRESENTATION

When kindness is lacking, says the Rav, mercy — rachamim — steps in. The word comes from rechem, the womb. It is no longer a matter of correcting; one must re-create. And only one person in the story could live this experience to the full.

THE QUESTION

Why is the convert regarded as a newborn — and why did it take a foreign woman to live this?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “Renewal is not touching up the old.”

When the measure of hesed is lacking, the measure of rachamim steps in: the person must be remade, re-created. Renewal is not restoring and restoring again; it is re-creating the being. That is why the ger, the convert who has agreed to join the Jewish people, is regarded as though newly born.

This experience could truly be lived only by someone foreign to the Jewish people: Ruth, mother of messianic kingship. And here is a rare thing: when their husbands die, these two daughters-in-law, princesses, daughters of the kings of Moav, remain attached to their mother-in-law.

Naomi, on the edge of the abyss, abandoned, is aware that she went down into exile and considers it her duty to return to her cradle. If she merited Ruth, it is because she was gentle, pleasant in her ways, in her conduct, in her bearing.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There are changes one does not make by touching up, but by agreeing to be reborn. Have we known such a moment? And does our way of being — like Naomi's gentleness — make others want to follow us?

The Moabite Man, Not the Moabite Woman



PRESENTATION

The Torah closes the door of the community to “the Ammonite and the Moabite”. How, then, could Ruth the Moabite marry Boaz and become David’s ancestress? Our sages read the verse with a precision that changed everything.

THE QUESTION

How were the sages able to open a door that the Torah seemed to close “forever”?

THE ANSWER

“Ammoni, velo Ammonit; Moavi, velo Moavit” — an Ammonite man and not an Ammonite woman, a Moabite man and not a Moabite woman (Talmud).

Our sages decreed: this refers to the man and not to the woman. The man may not enter the community of Israel, but for the woman, the door can be opened. How did they allow themselves this?

There is a precedent. The Torah bars the mamzer from the people “forever”: he may be a great scholar, but he cannot found a family according to the rules. And yet here too our sages opened an emergency door, a door of purification, a filtering: when the origin has faded, been submerged, one does not go back to the beginnings to verify a doubt.

This is the second message the Torah conveys through Ruth: the opening of the Torah to the world of hesed. And let us note that it is always the feminine that steers this story: Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel and Leah, the midwives in Egypt.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

A rule can be read to close or to open, without being betrayed. In our family, is there a “rule” we apply in the most closed way possible? What would a more attentive, more precise reading yield?

Boaz, Tamar and Peretz: Audacity



PRESENTATION

Boaz carries audacity in his name: bo oz, in him is strength. He is not, says the Rav, one of those who cling to the letter of the law “like a little lamb”. And this audacity comes to him from far back: he descends from Peretz, the son of Tamar.

THE QUESTION

What did Boaz inherit from Tamar — and why does an irregular birth lead to the messianic line?

THE ANSWER

“Whose young woman is this?” (Ruth 2:5); Yehudah: “She is more righteous than I” (Bereshit 38:26).

Ruth knew in advance that she would not be accepted; one must measure what it meant for her to enter Boaz's field, and the time it took her. Boaz, a respectable man, asks a question: whose young woman is this? And that question opens the breach.

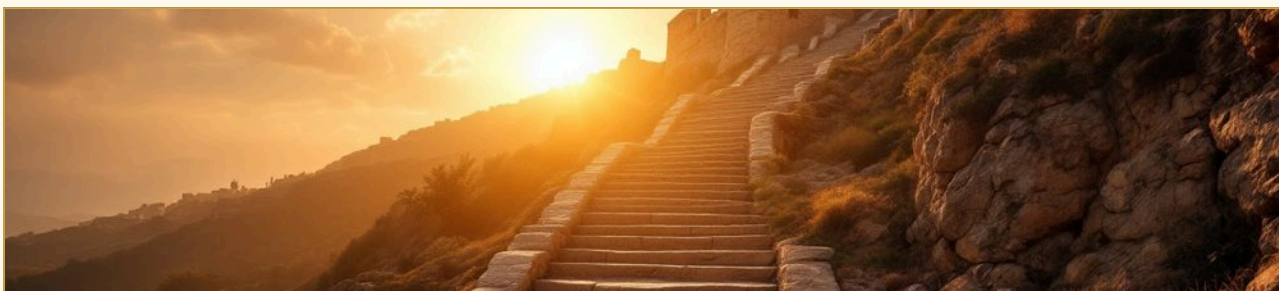
Boaz descends from Peretz, son of Tamar. At that time, the family was sacred: when a man died childless, he had to be given a name within the family. Tamar failed twice, and Yehudah refuses to give her his third son. But she is so attached to this family that she disguises herself to unite with him, and from this Peretz is born.

Yehudah acknowledges that she was right and that her intention was pure. Little by little, the child regains his place in the line — and that place is the messianic line. Boaz already carries this spirit within him.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Boaz did not begin with the law, but with a question: “Whose young woman is this?” Who around us is simply waiting for someone to take an interest in his story? What question could we ask this week that would “open the breach”?

The Last Word of the Tanach



PRESENTATION

The Tanach ends with a surprising word: vey'al, “and let him go up”. For the Rav, this last word says everything about the Torah's project — and it sheds light on why the Temple was destroyed.

THE QUESTION

Why does a Torah reduced to its narrowest sense have “no reason to exist”?

THE ANSWER

“...may the L-rd his G-d be with him, and let him go up” (Divrei HaYamim II 36:23).

It is the goal that determines everything. Once one has finished the Tanach, one must still carry out an ascent of being: that is how one enters this world of the infinite. The Torah without its messianic dimension, without its national dimension, without its social dimension, without its universal dimension, has no reason to exist.

Why was the Temple destroyed? Because people set themselves to take the Torah only in its restrictive sense, and not in its most generous, broadest sense: that of the Torah of hesed.

The reading of Ruth is a world foreign to the people that converts little by little. What the Jewish people did collectively at Sinai is done one by one among the other peoples. And without this dimension of the outside world, no messianism is possible.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What would our Judaism be if reduced to “what is permitted and forbidden”? Let each one say what, in his practice, belongs to a national, social or universal dimension. Which of these dimensions do we lack most?

The Fiftieth Level Belonged to a Son of Converts



PRESENTATION

It is taught that Moshe, who received the Torah, reached only forty-nine levels of understanding. Rabbi Akiva reached the fiftieth. When Moshe hears, in the heavenly house of study, Rabbi Akiva explaining the crowns set on each letter, he can no longer follow at all.

THE QUESTION

What could a descendant of converts attain that the one who received the Torah from the hand of G-d did not attain?

THE ANSWER

Moshe in Rabbi Akiva's house of study (Menachot 29b).

Rabbi Akiva was the son of converts; he came from a foreign world. The fiftieth level is that dimension, the dimension of universality. Moshe, for his part, was born of Amram and Yocheved; he grew up in the Egyptian palace, but he had not rubbed shoulders with every culture.

G-d chose the virtue and the particular quality of each people, among the seventy nations that are the backbone of humanity, and He invested them in us. That is why we are the prototype of Adam, and this universality of the first man must be preserved. That is not to say that the others are worth nothing; that is false. In every fruit there is a shell, sometimes a thick one, but there is a fruit inside, which can complete the full range of flavors.

Into the incense of the Temple went an ingredient, the chelbenah, which, burned on its own, smelled bad; mixed with the others, it intensified the fragrance. Such is the man who comes from elsewhere: arriving with what he had, he took on the values of the Torah and gave them even more substance.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The fiftieth level is a foreign dimension, the dimension of universality.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We distrust what comes from outside, and we call it faithfulness. What part of what we know today was brought to us by someone who was not “one of us”? Whom have we pushed aside because he “smelled too strong”, when he was just what the blend was missing?

Who Guards the Door?



PRESENTATION

A listener is worried: if the Torah is opened to what comes from outside, who will filter? Is it not a door open to anything? The Rav's answer shifts the question from the institution to the master.

THE QUESTION

By what do we recognize the one who should decide whether to open or close the door?

THE ANSWER

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself” — Rabbi Akiva: this is a great principle of the Torah.

Today, authorities quarrel over exclusive control of conversion, while no one can guarantee that a candidate will not return to his former practices. The Torah did not give us the laws of an institution of conversion; and the offering the candidate used to bring has been abolished. The Rav acknowledges that some authorities have the force of law; but he proposes a criterion.

When Rabbi Akiva says that love of one's neighbor is a great principle of the Torah, he is telling us: you want to judge a master of the Torah? Judge the love he bears his neighbor. If he seeks to solve the other's problems in whatever way he can, to bring him closer, to integrate him, to help him move forward, he is a great man of Torah.

The counter-example is the woman who wanted to convert in Avraham's household and was turned away: it took its revenge on us. As long as the door can be left open to let a person taste little by little, it must be kept open.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is easy to close the door.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Closing a door is easy; keeping it open takes work. To whom have we made access difficult — to our table, to our community, to our family? What would it take for that person to be able to “taste little by little”?

Why Six Ears of Grain?



PRESENTATION

Boaz comes to his fields, not to oversee his workers, but to check something else. He greets them in the name of G-d. Then, as he sends Ruth away, he gives her six measures of barley for her mother-in-law. Six is not a gift: it is a handful.

THE QUESTION

What can one do with six ears — and why this number, precisely, for a foreign woman who came to glean?

THE ANSWER

“Let some ears fall for her from the sheaves” (Ruth 2:16); “he measured six of barley and laid them on her” (Ruth 3:15).

Boaz is an owner who regards his employees as true partners and respects them. If he comes to watch over his lands, it is not to make sure that everyone is doing his work: of that he is sure. His only fear is that the laws of gleaning, of the forgotten sheaf, of the corner left for the poor are not scrupulously observed. Everything you do — do you do it with respect for what belongs to the poor, the widow and the orphan?

And when he sees with what modesty this woman gathers the ears, he tells his workers: pretend to have forgotten, let sheaves fall so that she can gather them. Where will you find owners like that? A listener even mentions a custom from Casablanca: leftovers were not offered to the household help; she was told to take them home for her children.

As for the six: if you have dared to come here, if you have left your royal rank to come and glean, you will have a messianic descendant who will be distinguished by six attributes. Boaz was not a prophet; he carried this in his thought.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It was the soul of a man who believes in the other and shares his aspirations with him.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

When we check up on things, it is almost always our own interests we are checking. What would each of us check if he had only the share of others to check? To whom, this year, have we given “as if by oversight”, to spare him the shame of asking?

King David Did Not Steal His Place



PRESENTATION

Shavuot is the day of David's birth and death. Our sages take little interest in anniversaries; if they made a point of honoring David on that day, it is because David questioned his origins all his life: "I was a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my mother's sons."

THE QUESTION

Why does the one who embodies the kingship of Israel call himself a stranger in his own home?

THE ANSWER

"I have become a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my mother's sons" (Tehillim 69:9).

A midrash relates that Yishai, David's father, had separated from his wife and proposed to a maidservant that she marry him. The maidservant went to her mistress; the lawful wife discreetly took her place. Yishai believed to the end that the child came from the maidservant: David was born this way, in the shadow of a supposed sin.

His father kept him somewhat at a distance, thinking he was not his; he did not resemble his brothers, who gave him the most thankless tasks. When Shmuel arrives, Yishai shows him six sons, and none answers to the will of G-d. Are there no more children? There is one, whom I rejected. Bring him. And it is he who must be anointed king.

David too went through the twists and turns of this re-creation of being, and it served the whole people. For the Torah is not an optional religion, to be learned if one wishes: it is the very essence of our identity.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Israel is a nation only by virtue of its Torah.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In many families there is a child who is given the thankless tasks, or who has been misjudged. Who, among us, was set aside on a suspicion never verified? What would we do if the prophet walked in tonight and asked whether anyone else is left?