

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

SHAVUOT

12 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Festive Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Shavuot: Ruth, the Eshet Chayil, and Hesed”: who the three
women of valor of the Bible are, what the angels of Shalom
Aleichem are doing at our table, why ishah is not the feminine of
ish, and what decided Naomi to accept Ruth.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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Themes for reflection and questions to share around the Shavuot table

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SUBJECT 01

Three Women of Valor



PRESENTATION

On the eve of Shavuot, the focus of the festival is a woman: Ruth, a foreigner, of a lineage one would rather not mention. The Rav points out that the expression *eshet chayil*, woman of valor, appears only three times in the entire Bible.

THE QUESTION

Who are these three “women of valor” — and why does the attribute apply to Ruth in particular?

THE ANSWER

“A woman of valor is the crown of her husband” (Mishlei 12:4); “all my people know that you are a woman of valor” (Ruth 3:11).

Ruth is a young woman from abroad who, through her diligence, her zeal, her self-denial, joins the ranks of the Jewish people. She becomes the ancestress not only of King David, but also of the messianic figure we await. And it is to her in particular that the attribute of *eshet chayil* applies.

There are three mentions of it. The first: the woman of valor is the crown of her husband. The second is the one King Shlomo praises at the end of his hymn to wisdom, which he sees embodied in the feminine. And the third is Ruth.

Boaz, a notable of the community, takes under his wing this foreign woman who has come, out of poverty, to glean ears of grain in his fields.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

If we were to award a title of “valor” in our home, to whom would it go — and for what: a visible feat, or a quiet constancy? Let each one name a person who has earned it through self-denial.

There Is Gleaning and Gleaning



PRESENTATION

In Boaz's fields, two attitudes meet. The reaper lets ears of grain fall and does not bother to pick them up. And behind him, someone comes to gather them one by one. The Rav asks: which of the two is valiant?

THE QUESTION

Who truly deserves the title of “valor”: the one who owns the field, or the one who gathers what is forgotten in it?

THE ANSWER

“She gleaned in the field behind the reapers” (Ruth 2:3).

There is the gleaning of wheat left behind, abandoned by the reaper, who considers that these are mere details and cannot feed him. He has enough. He masters everything, he knows everything, he owns a great many things.

And there is the poor person who comes diligently to the fields to glean these forgotten, abandoned ears, and lives on them. It is that one, perhaps, who deserves to be called *eshet chayil*, a woman of valor.

That is Ruth's situation: having come out of poverty to glean in another's field, she lives on what others did not judge worth picking up.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In our study, our relationships, our tradition, there are “forgotten ears” that we judge too small for us. Which ones? And who around us lives precisely on what we let fall?

SUBJECT 03

The Angels Who Change Shifts



PRESENTATION

On Friday night, before Eshet Chayil, we greet the angels of Shalom Aleichem, who accompany the father of the family from the synagogue to his home. The Rav asks a simple question: what are these angels doing there?

THE QUESTION

Why do we welcome new angels at the start of Shabbat?

THE ANSWER

“Shalom aleichem, malachei hasharet” — peace be upon you, ministering angels.

It is very poetic, these angels who accompany the father of the family. And there is a change of shift. There are the angels of the week, of every kind: financiers, farmers, advisers — today we would also say handymen. On the eve of Shabbat, they take their leave of us.

We set all these concerns aside; we consider that everything is finished, that there is nothing more to do. We are going to think about ourselves, about our family; we turn inward, we give ourselves time to recharge. That is Shabbat.

So we call on new angels for company: new spheres of thought, new ideas, a new reckoning. We approach our Shabbat with an entirely new spirit, a regenerated spirit.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Which “angels of the week” come home with us on Friday night: work, worries, screens? What could we concretely do to dismiss them at the door — and what would we like to welcome in their place?

Shalom, the Fullness of Being



PRESENTATION

In Shalom Aleichem, a final verse dismisses the angels: “Tzeitchem leshalom”, depart in peace. Some say it, others leave it out. The Rav sees in this a clue to what shalom truly is.

THE QUESTION

Why do some people feel no need to keep “angels” at their table?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “Shalom means fullness of being.”

We always speak of angels of peace. Yet shalom does not mean only peace: it depends on shlemut, wholeness, that inner sense of peace with one's surroundings, one's children, one's brothers, once all tensions have been cleared away.

It is as though we welcome the angels of peace because we are not sure of the fullness of being that reigns in the house. There are always tensions. And we sometimes invite strangers to brighten our table, so that boredom does not set in, to broaden our conversations.

Those who have no need of this, says the Rav, leave out that verse. They do not want to remain dependent on outsiders at their table, who would alter the language of the family, the language of serenity and fullness — and first of all with one's wife.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

As long as a man is not at peace with himself, he is at peace with no one.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Do we need guests, screens or outside topics for our Shabbat table to be pleasant? What would it take for the “language of the family” to be enough — and what tension would have to be soothed first?

Rot in the Bones



PRESENTATION

The book of Proverbs contrasts the woman of valor, crown of her husband, with the ishah mevishah, “like rot in his bones”. The Rav disputes the usual translation of this word and explains why the image bears precisely on the bones.

THE QUESTION

What is a woman who “shames” her husband — and why does the harm reach the very structure of the man?

THE ANSWER

“A woman of valor is the crown of her husband; but like rot in his bones is she who shames him” (Mishlei 12:4).

Ishah mevishah is not a “shameless woman”: that translation is not faithful to the text. Mevishah is a woman who humiliates her husband. She can humiliate him in several ways, notably because she has not fulfilled herself and has remained at the bottom of the ladder compared to him: then she undermines his structure.

The bones are what make up the structure of man. When the feminine is created, the text speaks of tzela: this is the word for the side of a mountain, and man's side is the feminine. Without this side, he cannot keep his balance.

That is why the structure of the feminine is called the inner structure, that of the bones; the flesh represents only the outside. If the bones are struck with rot, the remedy is difficult: nothing can take their place.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The Rav is not speaking here of reproaches, but of a woman who was not allowed to fulfil herself. In our marriage, our family, does each one have the chance to grow — studies, work, projects? Who, in our home, has remained “at the bottom of the ladder” without having chosen to?

SUBJECT 06

Ishah Is Not the Feminine of Ish



PRESENTATION

It is often thought that ishah, woman, is simply the feminine of ish, man. The Rav points out that a letter is missing: ish is written with a yud, ishah without a yud but with a dagesh. And the plurals hold another surprise.

THE QUESTION

What do the absorbed letter of ishah and the nun that reappears in the plural tell us?

THE ANSWER

Ish, anashim; ishah, nashim.

If ishah were the feminine of ish, it would keep the yud. But there is no yud in ishah, and there is a dagesh, to show that a letter has been absorbed. Whenever there is such a mark, it is a stressing of the letter, or the fusion of two letters, or the replacement of a hidden letter.

What is the plural of ish? Anashim. And of ishah? Nashim: the alef has disappeared. But where does this nun come from? The nun is the embryo of being: that is how it is represented in the Hebrew alphabet.

It reminds us that we are always in a state of conception. It stays absorbed when we count ourselves as individuals; but in a community, we are in a state of becoming, and it reappears: anashim, nashim.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Alone, we think ourselves “finished”; in a community, we become “in the making” again. What have family, friends, community made us discover about ourselves that we would never have seen alone? In what way are we still “in conception”?

It Is Not He Who Names the Woman



PRESENTATION

Adam named all beings, for to name is to know the function of each thing and to master it. But he himself did not yet know his own nature. And when the feminine is presented to him, he does not name it as he did the others.

THE QUESTION

Where does Adam get the word ish, which he had never used before — and who, in this sentence, truly defines the other?

THE ANSWER

“This one shall be called ishah, for from ish she was taken” (Bereshit 2:23); ish in the sense of yesh, “there is” (Michah 6:10).

Adam had just named all created beings, because each one answers to a well-defined function, and man goes on naming things today. But naming is a way of mastering. Yet he did not yet know his own nature: in the word Adam, masculine and feminine were jumbled together.

This word ish is found in the prophet Michah and in Iyov as a synonym of yesh. There is no verb “to have” in Hebrew; there is only the verb “to be”. The only reality we can consider in the face of the whole created universe is what we are, what we have acquired by ourselves, what we carry with us.

So man, when he sees the feminine, says: this is not named like the rest; she is part of myself. Our sages say that without a wife, a man knows neither good nor blessing: he is not complete. Adam realizes his own person through the being who has just been presented to him.

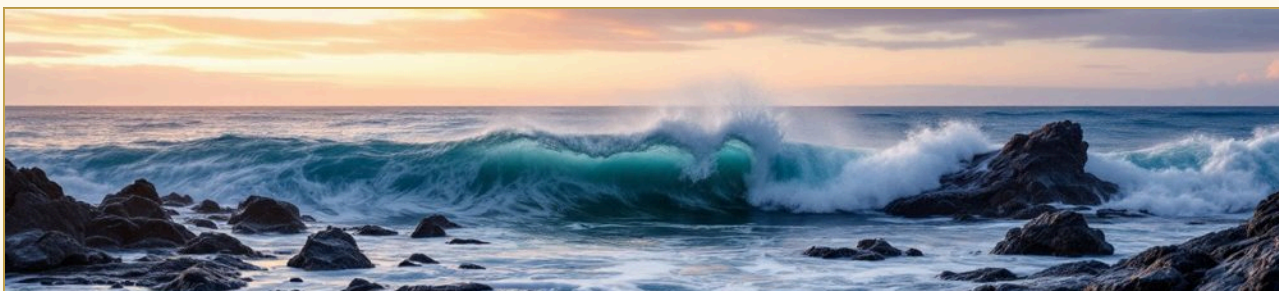
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is not he who defines the woman; it is the woman who defines him.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

It is easy to define one's own: their role, their character, their place. Let each one say instead who, in his life, has defined him — and does that person know it? What do we owe the one who made us know our own nature?

Chayil: A Struggle in Virtue



PRESENTATION

The Rav hears in chayil, valor, a dual vocalization, as in mayim, waters, or shamayim, heavens. For him, the woman's valor is a “struggle in virtue”, which points to a deeper duality.

THE QUESTION

What are the two faces of this struggle — and why is the Oral Law on the side of the feminine?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “There is no masculine and feminine in the attributes of HaKadosh Baruch Hu.”

Unlike other religions, Elokim is both masculine and feminine. In the Tanach, this appears in the duality of shamayim, spirit and matter; in the Talmud, it is HaKadosh Baruch Hu and His immanent presence; in the Zohar, the king and the queen; in Chassidic language, the revealed and the unrevealed. And a time will come when what is hidden will belong to the revealed.

Chayil carries this duality. There is a harsh, uncompromising manifestation: that of the Written Law, the chok, the limit, the “no” that is not to be touched. That is the zachar, the masculine.

The Oral Law, for its part, is the feminine: all the dialogue, all the discourse, an emanation of self, a transcription, an interpretation, an adaptation. Like the chanting of the Torah, which follows notes and yet leaves room for a whole poetry of being, for a whole range of composition.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Every family needs fixed rules and moments of dialogue. Who in our home embodies the “Written Law”, and who the “Oral Law”? How can these two voices sing together instead of clashing?

The Three Desires



PRESENTATION

Just as there are three eshet chayil, the word teshukah, desire, appears three times in the Tanach. The Rav reads them one after the other: after Adam's sin, facing Kayin, and in the Song of Songs.

THE QUESTION

Who desires whom — and what do these three desires teach us about the couple and about our relationship with G-d?

THE ANSWER

“Your desire shall be toward your husband” (Bereshit 3:16); “its desire is toward you” (Bereshit 4:7); “I am my beloved's, and his desire is toward me” (Shir HaShirim 7:11).

The first follows Adam's sin. It does not say that the woman will desire: it says that she will be the source of his desires, his fire, the one who brings back to reality all the citadels of reason he builds. What he will live through the fire of love, he will never have through scientific rigor alone.

The second is addressed to Kayin. Doing good is a yoke: it is not treating oneself to a good deed, it is doing good toward the other. You want to rise? Then you must make yourself small. Otherwise, sin crouches at your door, and instead of the desire for the Most High, you will have the desire for downfall.

The third is that of the community of Israel speaking to its Creator: I am my beloved's. It is not he who desires me: it is I who take charge of his desire. If we have lost the intimacy of this relationship, we have lost it also with G-d, with ourselves, with Shabbat.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In our home, who “carries” the other's desire, who takes charge of what makes him or her happy? The good we do — do we do it for the other, or to feel good about ourselves? Let each one name a “yoke” of kindness he willingly bears.

SUBJECT 10

A Poem Without Transcendence?



PRESENTATION

The Rav reads Eshet Chayil verse by verse: wool and flax, the spindle and the distaff, the fabrics sold to the merchant, the household run with vigilance. Then he asks: have you found anything transcendent in it?

THE QUESTION

If the poem speaks neither of Shabbat nor of kashrut, what makes Ruth a “woman of valor”?

THE ANSWER

“She opens her hand to the poor and stretches out her arms to the needy” (Mishlei 31:20).

One would expect to be told: here is a woman who keeps Shabbat properly, who is very careful about kashrut, who sorts the permitted from the forbidden. Yet about the story of Ruth, our sages say that there is nothing in it permitted or forbidden: this whole megillah was written only for the sake of gemilut chasadim.

Not an abstract kindness, the Rav specifies, but the giving of oneself: that is hesed, and Ruth embodied it. And that is what characterizes the eshet chayil: everything she does, she already directs toward her husband, toward her children.

Our sages sought the link between Ruth and the poem: the eshet chayil is first of all a zerizah, a woman who does things with zeal. She has a sense of perfection, but not an outward perfection: a perfection that breathes a depth of being.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is not she who is at the center of her own concerns: it is the other.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The gestures of the Eshet Chayil are ordinary: weaving, feeding, managing, giving. Which ordinary gesture in our home is in reality a giving of oneself that no one notices? To whom could we say so on Friday night, as we sing this poem?

SUBJECT 11

No Holiness in Solitude



PRESENTATION

Naomi returns from the fields of Moav, the fields of exile where famine had driven her. The Rav draws a lesson from this for today: we underestimate the cost of leaving for the sake of parnassah, livelihood, when it takes us away from a community.

THE QUESTION

Can one be holy all alone?

THE ANSWER

“You shall be holy” (Vayikra 19:2) — in the plural.

Many still go into exile today for their parnassah. But one must weigh the consequences of this search, when one had the possibility of living in an environment that guarantees the education of one's children and the fullness of one's home, one's society, one's community. For Jewish life is not practiced in solitude: one is a Jew only in community.

The notion of individual holiness does not exist. Holiness is belonging to the whole, with a heightened sense of responsibility for one another. Its opposite is a solitude in which man sees only what can give him pleasure, what answers to his ego — even in the practice of religion.

For the practice of religion is no armor for the soul: one can be a naval, corrupt under cover of the Torah. Our Jewish commitment is measured within the whole of a community, and the eshet chayil has exactly that meaning.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

There is holiness only in community.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Is our practice a private matter, or does it make us responsible for others? For whom in our community do we truly feel responsible? And who would feel alone if we were not there?

SUBJECT 12

Judaism Is a Mountain



PRESENTATION

Naomi did everything to dissuade her daughter-in-law from following her: you will not be accepted, people will look at you askance. Ruth insists. And at a precise moment, Naomi stops talking to her and accepts her. The Rav shows what convinced her.

THE QUESTION

Which words of Ruth convinced Naomi — and what does this say about what is expected of one who wishes to enter?

THE ANSWER

“Where you go I will go... your people shall be my people” (Ruth 1:16); “she girds her loins with strength and makes her arms firm” (Mishlei 31:17).

Naomi tells her: you will not be accepted, and I myself will be judged harshly for having abandoned the community when I had the means to serve it. Stay home. The others are not scoundrels: they are creatures of G-d. They have their law, they can very well fulfil themselves through it and be counted among the righteous of the nations.

Ruth answers: this is not a marriage of convenience; if I follow you, it is my heart that follows. Of course, Judaism is a mountain, as it was for Avraham, who climbed it. But I do not say: it is too hard, I will never manage. It is true, it is hard; every day I will work on myself a little, move forward a little.

When Naomi heard that she was making efforts to go forward, she spoke to her no more: she accepted her into her ranks. And the eshet chayil girds her loins with strength: not a herculean strength, but the strength she gives herself through zeal.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Faced with what seems too high for us — a mitzvah, a course of study, a change — do we say “I will never manage” or “I will move forward a little every day”? Which “mountain” does each of us want to start climbing this year?