

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

HANUKKAH

12 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Festive Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Hanukkah in History”: why the four exiles are inscribed before
light, why the war of the Maccabees was first of all an inner war,
and why the only thing to have outlived 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 inscribed in the verse that precedes the appearance of light?

THE ANSWER

“The earth was tohu va-vohu, and darkness on the face of the deep” (Bereshit 1:2): tohu, Babel; bohu, Persia; choshech, Greece; tehom, Rome.

The history of the Jewish people spins like this top and always faces the same problems. There is a hand up above that sets it spinning, and we merely follow the motion of four exiles programmed independently of our will, inscribed in the very origins of creation.

Babel sought to break us apart by depriving us of our national entity: we survived, and there we developed the Oral Law. Persia went after our emotions, then decided on physical extermination: that was our first Shoah, averted thanks to Mordechai and Esther. Greece, for its part, seeks to reach us spiritually, by substituting universal values for ours, to melt us down into a nation among the nations.

But if Israel's destiny is to be sought in the pre-creation, it is because these exiles are revelations in potential.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is from this darkness that the original light bursts forth, the light we will carry on through the light of Hanukkah.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

It is easy to say that everything is written and wash our hands of it. Yet it is up to us to light. What darkness in our life could become, if we wished, the place of a light?

Where is Yishmael?



PRESENTATION

The Hellenistic exile continued through Rome. Today, says the Rav, we live in the era of Edom, galut Edom, which is the sum of all the exiles. But one name is missing from the list of four: Yishmael.

THE QUESTION

Why is Yishmael not named among the four exiles, and what are the two faces of persecution?

THE ANSWER

Esav marries Machalat, daughter of Yishmael (Bereshit 28:9).

You will notice that Yishmael is not named. Some include him in Persia. Others say: careful, Yishmael has a reality of his own only thanks to Edom.

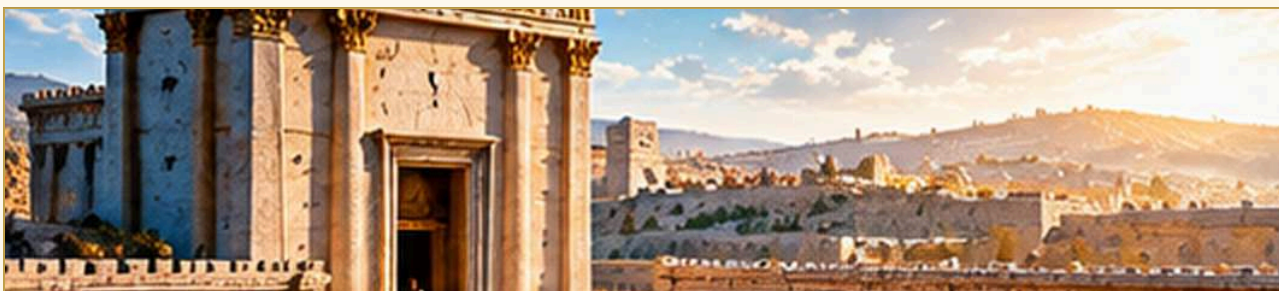
For when Esav married Machalat, Yishmael's daughter, he made an alliance with the world of Yishmael. Since then, Yishmael and Edom have, in a sense, competed in persecuting the Jewish people.

There are two attributes: the oyev, the enemy, and the sonei, the one who hates. One is attributed to Esav, the other to Yishmael. It is in this period of history that we move today.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

An enemy who fights is not the same as a man who hates. In our personal conflicts, can we tell the opponent apart from the one who bears us a grudge? And is the right attitude the same toward both?

The Greeks did not destroy the Temple



PRESENTATION

Babel burned the Sanctuary; Rome would raze it. The Greeks, for their part, left it standing. They asked only that other beliefs be allowed in alongside. And it was against that proposal that the revolt of the Maccabees broke out.

THE QUESTION

If the Greeks left the Temple standing, against whom did the Maccabees really wage war?

THE ANSWER

The war was waged more against the *mityavnim*, that is, against the tendency within the Jewish 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 the prophetic voice fell silent. These Hellenizers contested the passing of prophecy to our masters.

What was demanded was to have no national reality, and to live Judaism as a set of traditions. Yet the national entity is an essential *mitzvah*: the Torah can be fully carried out only in Eretz Yisrael, and to conceive it outside is to cut it off from half its virtues. Separating Judaism from its national entity, or the national entity from Judaism, is distorting our heritage.

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

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

To conceive it outside Eretz Yisrael is to cut it off from half its power, its virtues.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The Greek proposal was gentle: keep your traditions; give up only what sets you apart. What have we already agreed to give up so as not to stand out? And what would we still refuse to give up?

SUBJECT 04

Out of Yavan, but limping



PRESENTATION

The Rav admits it plainly: Hellenization partly succeeded. We are no longer in the world of Yavan, Greece; that exile we have moved beyond. But did we come out of it intact?

THE QUESTION

What has the Greek exile left us, and what should we do with a wound that never quite closes?

THE ANSWER

Yaakov comes out limping from his struggle with Esav's angel (Bereshit 32).

The exile of Yavan has been moved beyond, but we did not come out of it unscathed. Just as the struggle between Yaakov and Esav left Yaakov limping — limping in his descendants, in his children — we too bear the marks of that combat.

But in spite of everything, says the Rambam according to the Rav, we must keep pressing on with this illumination of the world by keeping alive the spark of Yaakov.

A people that limps has not stopped walking. What matters is not having come out without a wound, but keeping alight the spark that survived the combat.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each of us bears a wound from past battles. What, in spite of it, goes on shining in us? How can we help the one around us who “limps” to keep his spark?

SUBJECT 05

Aharon's sons and the golden calf



PRESENTATION

The revolt of Hanukkah was led by a family of Kohanim, the Hasmoneans. The Rav places it in the continuation of a far older episode: the golden calf, in whose making Aharon, the first Kohen, had taken part.

THE QUESTION

Why did it fall to Aharon's descendants to lead this battle — and what danger does the golden calf still represent?

THE ANSWER

Aharon had thought that the golden calf was no real threat to the future of the Jewish people. So it fell to his descendants to take up this battle again and carry it through to the end.

For from the moment Judaism begins to think of itself solely in terms of a person's emotions, or solely in terms of reason, without coordinating the two, there is a threat of deviation: we become a religion like all the others. There is no Judaism that is solely an adherence of the heart, nor solely a movement of thought.

The one degenerated into mysticism; the other developed a free, secular Judaism. In both cases, we lost what makes us distinctive.

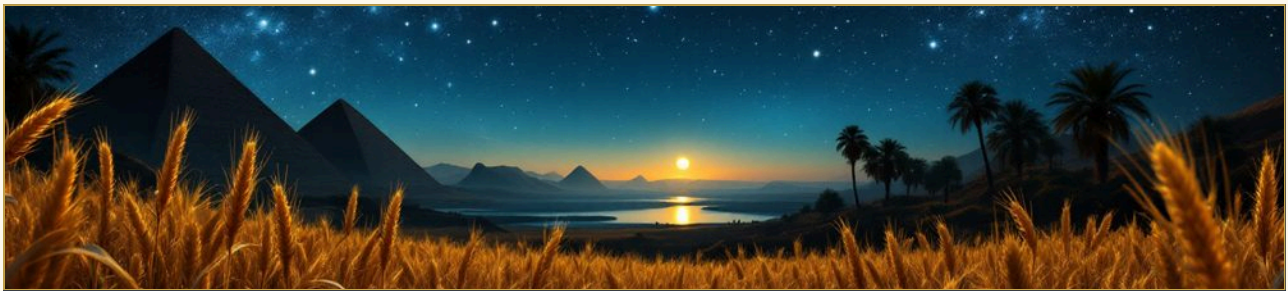
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

There is no Jewish religion that is solely an adherence of the heart. There is no Jewish religion that is solely a movement of thought.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Are we more “Jews of the heart” or “Jews of the head”? Let each person say what he lacks from the other side, and what he could learn from the one at this table who lives it the other way round.

Yosef, the stars and the sand



PRESENTATION

Who opened the way to universalism, the way Greece would seek to impose? For the Rav, it was Yosef: after the patriarchs, he made the link between the world of the avot and the great Egyptian empire. And this can already be read in his dreams.

THE QUESTION

How do Yosef's dreams differ from Yaakov's ladder — and what did he give Egypt?

THE ANSWER

The sheaves and the stars (Bereshit 37); Yaakov's ladder (Bereshit 28).

In his dreams, Yosef had already separated the economy of the earth from the world of the spirit. He was not like his father, who had set up a ladder between the world here below and the heavenly world. He made a distinction: the spirit shines like the stars of the sky in the dead of night — that is one of the faculties of the Jewish people; but the other is to be like the sand of the earth and to carry out here below, with the other nations, the world of action.

Yosef shared with the Egyptian world a true social doctrine, through the nationalization of the land. He gave it the science of dreams, the way to interpret them. And on top of that he gave it faith in Elokim.

He considered it his duty to serve Egypt, even if he did not give in on everything.

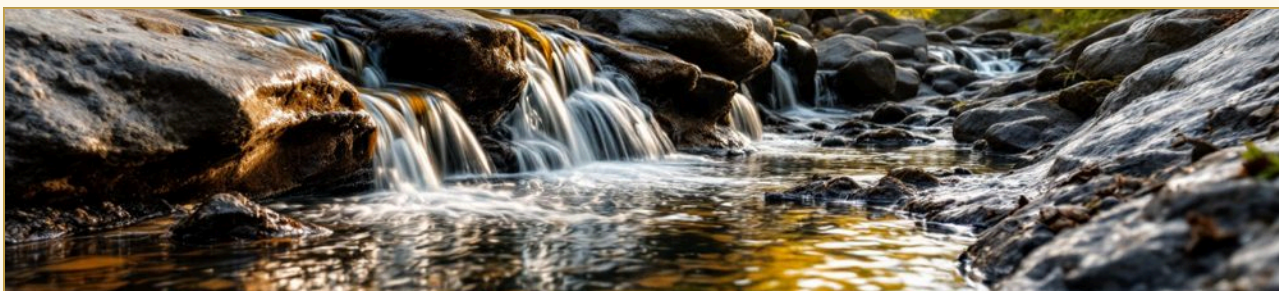
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Yosef is the man who, after the patriarchs, made the link between the world of the avot and the great Egyptian empire.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We too live between “the stars” and “the sand”: the life of the spirit and the life of work. Do we keep them apart, or connect them like Yaakov's ladder? Let each person say where, for him, the missing rung is.

“Mi eleh lach”: bringing the many back to the One



PRESENTATION

When Esav meets Yaakov, he sees his children and asks: “Mi eleh lach?” — who are these to you? Much later, Yaakov will ask the same question about Yosef’s sons, born in Egypt. The Rav reads in it the secret of the name Elokim.

THE QUESTION

What does the word Elokim reveal, and why, at the golden calf, did the people demand an “elohim” rather than Hashem?

THE ANSWER

“The children whom Elokim has graciously given your servant” (Bereshit 33:5); “Whoever is for the L-rd, to me!” (Shemot 32:26).

The world of eleh, “these”, is the world of the many, of diversity. Bringing them back to a mi, to a single source, is hard for the peoples. Yet Yaakov answers: these are the children Elokim gave me — and Elokim is the contraction of eleh and mi. What we do in our faith is bring the many back to the One. Likewise, before Yosef’s children steeped in Egyptian culture, the answer is: these are the ones Elokim gave me here.

Elokim is the G-d we know through creation, the One who created the many. But when He reveals Himself to the people, He says: I am Hashem your G-d. That name is the name of love prevailing over justice.

At the golden calf, the people ask Aharon to make them an elohim: not the G-d of Sinai, but the elohim common to all peoples. That is when Moshe cries out: whoever is for Hashem, to me! — the struggle the Maccabees would take up again.

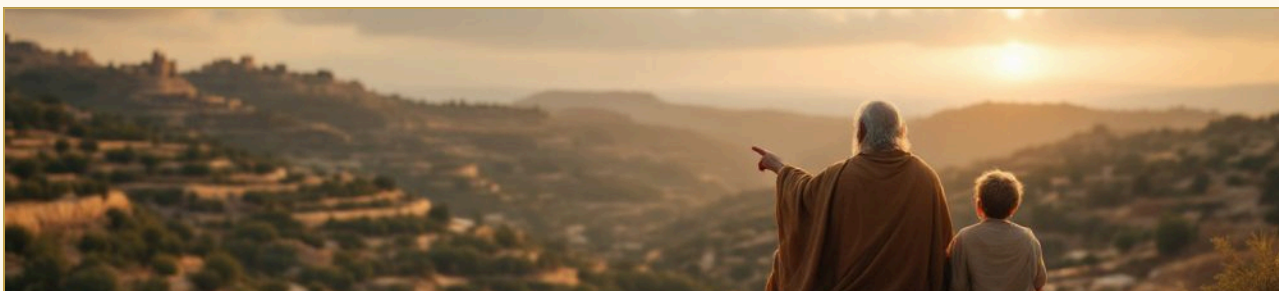
THE RAV’S CONCLUSION

What we do in our faith is bring the many back to the One.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Our lives are made up of a thousand “these”: activities, roles, desires. What gathers them around a single source? Let each person say what gives his days their unity.

Ask your father



PRESENTATION

Hanukkah is a festival instituted by our Sages, and yet we say a blessing over it: “who commanded us to light.” Our Sages asked: where did He command us? The Rav draws from this a lesson on transmission.

THE QUESTION

Where does the Torah command us to obey our Sages — and what does this say about the role of the land of Israel?

THE ANSWER

“Ask your father and he will tell you; your elders, and they will say it to you” (Devarim 32:7); “you shall not turn aside to the right or to the left” (Devarim 17:11).

Two answers are given. The first: ask your father, and he will tell you. The second: do not turn aside from what they teach you, to the right or to the left. So there are two teachings. First, to attach oneself to the history of the elders and continue this line of history. Second, to keep all the laws of the Torah in their entirety, and not begin adapting them to the politics of the surrounding world, to please the other peoples.

For the land of Israel is designed to be the academy, the international university of the whole world, where all values are cultivated, analyzed, weighed and measured by the criteria of the law. It is there that all of a person's ideas and actions are put to the test.

Wanting to submit these values to the criteria of others is already distorting them.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Wanting to submit these values to the criteria of others is already distorting them.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What question would we like to ask our parents or grandparents tonight, about what they received and passed on? And which value of our family are we tempted to “adapt” in order to please?

SUBJECT 09

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

Did our Sages invent the eight days of lights — or did they receive them from someone?

THE ANSWER

How, in the resistance, could one let others know that a boy had been born in this house whose circumcision was to take place in eight days? On the first day a 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 increased up to the eighth day.

This miracle of the eight days was not instituted by the rabbis: it was the people. And our Sages adopted this tradition of the people, this resistance of the people, through the lighting of the eight days of Hanukkah.

That is why the eight days are tied not only to the flask of oil, but also to the Brit Milah and to everything this covenant establishes.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

This miracle of the eight days — it was not the rabbis; it was the people.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Is there a custom in our home born not of a rule, but of someone's faithfulness — a grandmother, a neighbor? Who still keeps it up, and who will take it on?

SUBJECT 10

Any oil would have done



PRESENTATION

It is told that the Hasmoneans looked for a flask of oil sealed with the seal of the Kohen Gadol. The Rav points out that, if none were available, the Menorah could have been lit with any olive oil. So the miracle lies elsewhere than we think.

THE QUESTION

If any oil could have been used, what is so special about the light of the Menorah?

THE ANSWER

“He stored it away for the righteous, for the future” — the light of the first day.

What remained of the Temple was the Menorah. It is what carries the holiness of Israel, through its lights, into every Jewish home. What remains in every Jewish home is not the Sanctuary, not the worship of the Sanctuary: it is the light of the Menorah.

Now this light is not within the nature of creation; it lies beyond it. The first time, the world could not bear the original light, because there were not yet any righteous in whom it could be deposited. He stored it away for the righteous, in the hearts of the righteous.

When we light at the threshold of the house, it is a way of saying: here is the original light, created beyond these worlds that persecuted us, and we carry it through time beyond the world of creation.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

What remains in every Jewish home is not the Sanctuary, not the worship of the Sanctuary: it is the light of the Menorah.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Of everything our parents owned, what has truly come down to us? Let each person name a “light” from his childhood home that he goes on lighting in his own.

SUBJECT 11

“You are the ones who should be ashamed”



PRESENTATION

Two outrages set off the revolt. In Modi'in, an altar was built and a large reward promised to any Jew who would offer a pig on it. And for three years and eight months, a decree required every new bride to be handed over first to the city governor before joining her husband.

THE QUESTION

Why is a woman, normally exempt from time-bound mitzvot, obliged to light the Hanukkah lights?

THE ANSWER

The daughter of Yochanan, the Kohen Gadol.

This decree struck at the descendants of the Jewish people and at the dignity of women. The daughter of Yochanan, the High Priest, was getting married; there was a celebration, and at the end of it she was to go to the governor. So she tore her wedding dress before all the guests, who were scandalized. She told them: you are the ones who should be ashamed, because you let this happen. I, the daughter of the High Priest, will not go. At that, the revolt broke out.

It was a woman who set off the revolt. That is why a woman, even though this is a time-bound mitzvah, is obliged to light: she was part of this miracle.

The people were then offered the chance to keep their traditions, on condition that they give up all national aspiration, and Yehudah the Maccabee would have none of it. Our light, facing the mezuzah, says that we want to share our light with the world, but gradually, without brazenness, without arrogance, without seeking to colonize minds.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Listen — you are the ones who should be ashamed, because you let this happen.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What have we learned to find normal because everyone goes along with it? And do we know how to say no without arrogance, like a light that rises little by little?

SUBJECT 12

The only tribal prince who brought nothing



PRESENTATION

The Hanukkah light is lit on the 25th of Kislev. The Rav recalls a tradition: it was on this date that the work on the Sanctuary is said to have been completed. At its inauguration, each tribal leader brought his offering, one per day, twelve days of festivities. Only one was not designated: Aharon, for the tribe of Levi. He took offense.

THE QUESTION

What does Aharon receive in exchange for the offering he was not asked to bring — and why is it worth more?

THE ANSWER

The lighting of the Menorah entrusted to Aharon and his sons (Bamidbar 8).

Aharon took offense, and G-d said to him: careful — the Temple is destined to be destroyed. What they are bringing will come to an end one day or another. But you — what I will give you is the lighting of the Menorah.

And that lighting would continue beyond the Temple, through the nights of exile.

For it is through this spreading of light that Israel's true destiny among the nations is fulfilled.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is through this spreading of light that Israel's true destiny among the nations is fulfilled.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Aharon thought he had been forgotten, and he was being given the one thing that would last. Who felt left out this year? And if what he was refused is not what matters, what should be entrusted to him?