

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

HANUKKAH

11 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Festive Table

Eleven questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Hanukkah: Each Person's Own Light”: what a light “for a man
and his household” means, why the Oral Law belongs to us alone,
what the four ages of giving are, and why bearing the Name is not
enough without being worthy of bearing it.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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Themes for reflection and questions to share around the Hanukkah table

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SUBJECT 01

A light of one's own, displayed before all



PRESENTATION

The halachah of Hanukkah fits into three words: “ner ish u-veito”, a light for a man and his household. The Rav draws a whole teaching from it: the light of Hanukkah is the most personal there is, and yet it is the one we set out for all to see.

THE QUESTION

How can a light be both each person's own and made to be shown?

THE ANSWER

“Ner ish u-veito” — a light for a man and his household.

Ner ish u-veito means that it is each person's own light that is displayed before everyone. We do not hide it: we want to share it with everyone. And yet this light is our own; it is particular to us.

This light is the indelible essence that is our own, the one no one can take from us.

And when it cannot be displayed outside, it is still lit inside the house, for oneself, because that is what matters. The bayit, the home we have built, justifies its existence only through this light.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

This light is the indelible essence that is our own, which no one can truly take from us.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Let each person say what in him is a light of his own — a quality, a conviction — and whether he dares to show it or hides it. What holds us back from displaying it?

SUBJECT 02

A festival in which the world carries on as usual



PRESENTATION

Hanukkah belongs to a slice of history that opens the messianic era. And yet there is nothing spectacular; the world goes on living normally. We do not stop working; we read no scroll. Only the Hallel changes, along with the expression of gratitude and the affirmation of the divine Name.

THE QUESTION

What remains of a festival when nothing changes — and what do Hallel and hoda'ah mean?

THE ANSWER

Hallel ve-hoda'ah — praise and gratitude.

Our Sages instituted two things: Hallel and hoda'ah. Hallel is the radiance of light: the word evokes a ray of light, the brilliance of G-d's manifestation on earth. Hoda'ah is the expression of gratitude.

This gratitude is truly the key to the matter: not everything we hold comes from ourselves. We have received in order to give.

And in the thanksgiving of Hanukkah, we recall that after the victory the Sanctuary was purified — today, we would say, of the dross of thought, of the philosophy or way of life that civilizations impose on us. No generation escapes it: we are always confronted with Yishmael on one side and Esav on the other.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

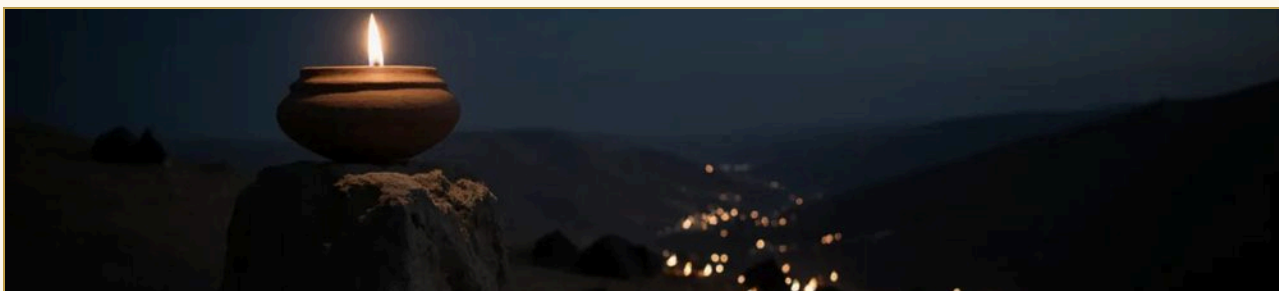
Not everything we hold comes from ourselves. We have received in order to give.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

A quiet festival demands more attention than a spectacular one. What “dross of thought” from the world around us would we like to clean out of our home during these eight days?

SUBJECT 03

Chosen from among the peoples



PRESENTATION

The world of Greece, says the Rav, is already the world of Esav. But he warns against a reflex: always taking Esav for “the bad guy.” For to be the chosen people is to be chosen from among peoples.

THE QUESTION

If we must live alongside other peoples, what does it mean to be “the point of reference”?

THE ANSWER

Let us not forget: we will always take Esav for a villain. But no: if we are the chosen people, we are chosen from among peoples with whom we must live side by side, with whom we must exist. Except that we must be the point of reference.

What does being the point of reference mean? We stand out through a certain independence of life, in dignity. We do not want to submit to any power or any current of thought: we want to remain ourselves.

Yishmael too — they are, after all, Avraham's children. We will not ignore them, nor despise them, nor reject them, but light their way, through the way we live the law.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We will not ignore them, we will not despise them, we will not reject them — but we will light their way.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

It is easier to condemn the other than to light his way. Is there someone we treat as a “villain” who is perhaps only waiting for our example? How can we remain ourselves without rejecting him?

SUBJECT 04

Thought is shared; halachah belongs to us



PRESENTATION

Others have tried to appropriate the Written Torah, and certain religions have adopted it. The Rav is not troubled by this: in the realm of thought, he says, we share it with everyone. What is our own lies elsewhere.

THE QUESTION

What remains inalienably Israel's when its Written Torah is read by the whole world?

THE ANSWER

The Written Torah and the Oral Torah.

We remain ourselves in the realm of halachah, of the way things are done. Thought we share with everyone; halachah is our own.

The Oral Torah is the one we developed, the one that gives rise to controversies, discussions, disputes. It is from there that we must draw the way of life that is our own, inalienable.

And the mitzvah is done with the heart, not with thought. Not because reason told us to, but quite simply because we want at all costs to preserve this exclusiveness of life. The Hanukkah lighting, indeed, is not a commandment of the Torah: it is an institution of our Sages.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

With the heart, not with thought.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We can share our ideas with anyone; our way of living is another matter. What concrete gesture in our home says, better than any speech, who we are?

The true kings



PRESENTATION

The story of Hanukkah is not written in the Bible. There is indeed a book of the Maccabees, but it remains outside the canon. What has been passed down to us are the institutions of our Sages, whom the Talmud calls “man malchei? Rabbanan”: who are the kings? The masters.

THE QUESTION

Why are our Sages, and not the Hasmonean kings, the true kings?

THE ANSWER

“Man malchei? Rabbanan” — who are the kings? The masters.

They chose to remain themselves in the study of the Torah, to develop it as they felt it from within, and to live it as they felt it from within. With a twofold feeling: Hallel and hoda'ah.

Kingship is not something dragged from father to son like a dynasty. You are a king from the moment the Torah you carry is no longer prey to all those who seek to destroy you, to annihilate you, to contest you. It is the Torah you carry in your heart.

That is why we say, in the blessing after the Torah reading: “Ve-chayei olam nata betochenu”, eternal life He planted within us. This eternal life is the Oral Torah, and Hanukkah celebrates this taking in hand of the Written Law, transformed into Oral Law.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

You are a king from the moment the Torah you carry is no longer prey to all those who seek to destroy you. It is the Torah you carry in your heart.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

A kingship one does not inherit but carries in one's heart: over what does each of us truly “reign”? What part of the Torah has become ours, so that no one could take it from us?

SUBJECT 06

Four ways of giving, only one that lasts



PRESENTATION

Gratitude, says the Rav, is understood by observing the four stages of exchange in a human life. We pass from one to the next as we grow up — but some remain in the first all their lives.

THE QUESTION

What is the fourth stage of exchange, the one that is neither taking, nor bargaining, nor sacrificing oneself?

THE ANSWER

“Kochi ve-otzem yadi” — my strength and the might of my hand (Devarim 8:17).

The baby takes; it takes; that is all it knows; when it is not given something, it cries. Some people have only this philosophy their whole life. The growing child is able to give, but on conditions: you give him a sweet, you threaten him, and exchange becomes a calculation of interest. The third stage is idealism: the adolescent wants to change the world; he gives and gives without receiving anything — and it does not last.

The fourth stage is to be a mekabel, to receive in order to be able to pass on. That is how the Jewish people understands its spiritual life: it received the Torah, but it will not keep it jealously to itself; it will be able to share it.

Gratitude is a struggle against “it is my strength that did all this.” For one who claims that, life is a hell: there comes a moment when one's strength grows old, when one realizes one depends on the other. Then comes the word: todah.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

When one realizes one depends on the other, what word comes? Todah!

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Let each person honestly place himself in one of the four ages of exchange — and say what he would need to move on to the next. When did we last say “thank you” knowing that we depended on the other?

SUBJECT 07

Doing a mitzvah without demanding its meaning



PRESENTATION

We are often demanding: we want to know the meaning of each thing before accepting it. The Rav suggests seeing the Hanukkah lighting as a training in the opposite.

THE QUESTION

What does a mitzvah performed without waiting to understand its reason teach us?

THE ANSWER

It happens that, for many reasons, we look for the meaning of every single thing, unwilling to admit that there are things independent of us, which we can neither control nor manage.

Doing a mitzvah is this training: what I do has nothing to do with the meaning I give to this mitzvah. I do it because the Torah prescribed it, because our Sages developed its practice out of the way they lived the Torah.

For very often, unfortunately, we have studied the Torah, we have learned the Torah, but we have not lived it. It does not burn from within; it does not take hold of us: it remains a garment.

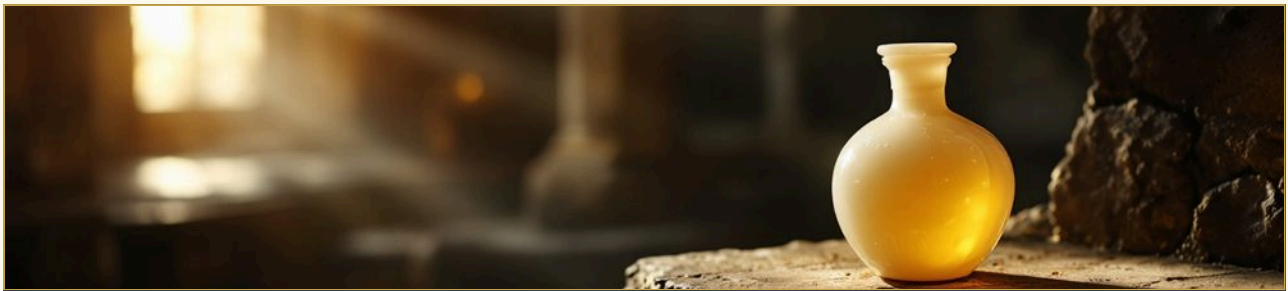
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We have studied the Torah, we have learned the Torah, but we have not lived it. It does not burn from within; it is a garment.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Do we need to understand everything before acting? Let each person name something he does out of trust rather than reason — and what it has taught him.

Bearing the Name, and being worthy of it



PRESENTATION

When we light the Hanukkah lights, we must recognize that this light is a mitzvah. But what is a mitzvah? The Rav breaks down the word according to a classic permutation of the letters of the alphabet, called atbash.

THE QUESTION

What does the word mitzvah conceal, and why is claiming the Name not enough?

THE ANSWER

By atbash, the mem and tzadi of mitzvah become yud and heh: mitzvah contains the four letters of the Name.

In atbash, the first letter of the alphabet is replaced by the last, the second by the second-to-last, and so on. The mem and tzadi of mitzvah then correspond to yud and heh, and the whole word carries the four letters of the divine Name. Yud-heh is the hidden side; vav-heh, the revealed side.

Doing a mitzvah, then, is bearing the Name, claiming it. But more than claiming it, it is being worthy of bearing it oneself, making oneself an essence.

And essence does not deteriorate, it does not disappear, it is always there. The anointing oil prepared by Moshe was used to anoint the objects of the Sanctuary and the kings, and it did not diminish: it remained the same.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is claiming this Name — but more than claiming it, it is being worthy of bearing it oneself.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We all bear a name, of a family and of a people. Are we worthy of it, or do we merely claim it? Let each person say what his first name or surname asks him to be.

SUBJECT 09

The light the world could not bear



PRESENTATION

The first thing created was light. It is not the light we know: it could illuminate the world from one end of the universe to the other. It was stored away. Yet we light at nightfall, in that halo that is no longer day and not yet night.

THE QUESTION

Where was the original light stored away — and why do we light it at that precise moment?

THE ANSWER

“He stored it away for the righteous, for the future”; “yom echad”, day one (Bereshit 1:5).

G-d kept it for the righteous, for the future. That means this light exists in each person, in each righteous one. It is there; it is simply a matter of bringing it to life and giving it the chance to shine.

And we give it this chance at a time that is neither day nor night: the moment when the sun has withdrawn but left in the world a halo of light that precedes the darkness. It is in this halo that we light our own light.

On the first day, the Torah does not say “the first day” but “yom echad”, day one. It is not an ordinal in a series: it is an independent day, one that allows every being to stop being conditioned by time, to step out of time and make himself a new spirit, a new heart. That is the movement of Hanukkah.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

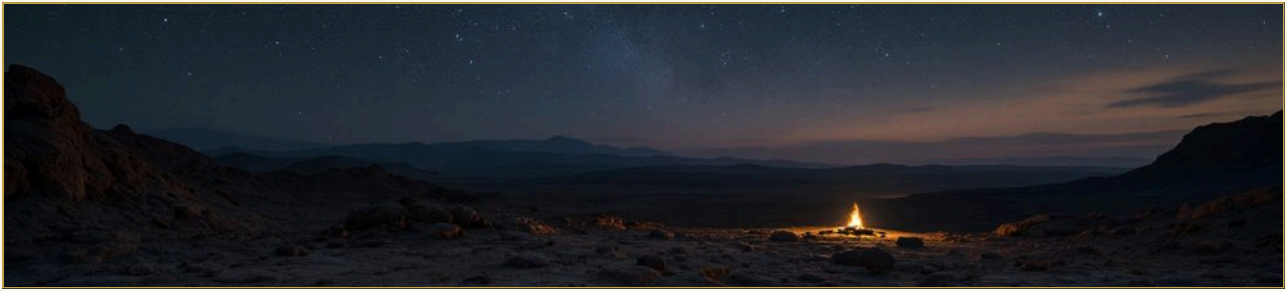
This light exists in each person, in each righteous one. It is there; it is simply a matter of bringing it to life.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each person carries a light no one can take from him, and that no one can light in his place. Let each guest name the light he recognizes in his neighbor at the table — and listen to what others recognize in him.

SUBJECT 10

Who is like You among the silent?



PRESENTATION

After prophecy ceased, G-d no longer speaks to us in the same way. On Hanukkah we do not even tell the story, as we do on Pesach with the Haggadah. The Rav cites a daring reading of a verse from the Song of the Sea.

THE QUESTION

How can we praise a G-d who no longer reveals Himself openly — and who then keeps His Name?

THE ANSWER

“Mi chamocha ba-elim” (Shemot 15:11), reread by our Sages: “Mi chamocha ba-illemim” — who is like You among the mute.

“Who is like You among the mighty?” But how could any comparison be made? Our Sages say: that is not how it should be read. It should be read: who is like You among the mute — when You turn a deaf ear, when You no longer reveal Yourself, when You leave us to manage Your world on earth.

Then it is our Sages, the dignitaries of the divine Name, who bear its dignity. And Hashem cares about His Name as we care about ours. Moshe himself said it: act for the sake of Your Name, that it not be contested.

Todah comes from yad, the hand: giving thanks means lending a hand to the other, saying I need you more than you need me. Hence a solidarity affirmed with everyone, even with those who are in the darkness of night.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

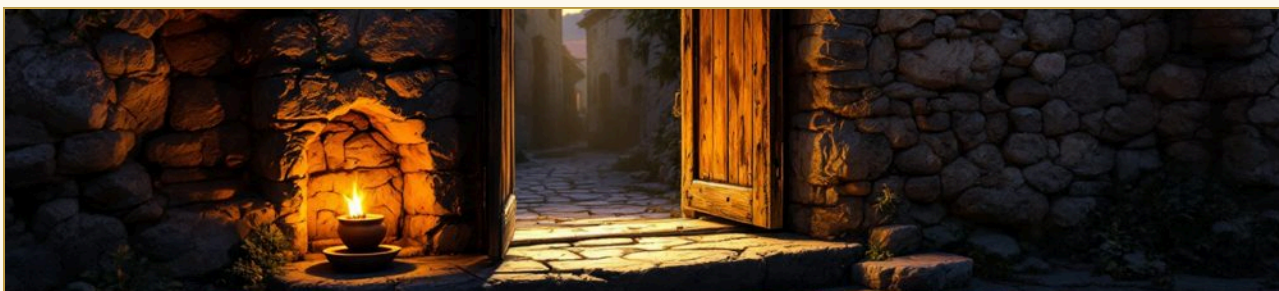
Who is like You when You turn a deaf ear, when You leave us to manage Your world on earth.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

When G-d seems silent, it is up to us to bear His Name. In our life, what “silence” of G-d forced us to take on our responsibilities? And to whom could we “lend a hand” this week?

SUBJECT 11

Coming in and going out by the light



PRESENTATION

It is no coincidence, says the Rav, that Hanukkah falls when we read the story of Yishmael in Avraham's house, of Esav in Yitzchak's, and of Yaakov's sons with Yosef. The greatest danger is not outside: it is within families.

THE QUESTION

Why is the Hanukkah light placed at the threshold of the house — and what must it guard?

THE ANSWER

“A person should always come in by the light and go out by the light” — a teaching of our Sages.

What is most dangerous is that the animosity of Yishmael and Esav should reappear in Yaakov's family, among children born of four different mothers. The unity of the family, the unity of the people, passes through peace — whether we like it or not. It is from within our families that the radiance can spread outward, because Yishmael, Esav and Amalek dwell in us one way or another.

The outside world assails us from every side, and this aggression can cross the threshold of the door. But the threshold of the door carries the essence of light.

Forever, a person must come into his home when there is light, and go out of his home when there is light.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

This inalienable light, each person has it within himself. It does not have the same intensity in all, but it is there.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

With what light do we come home in the evening, and with what light do we leave in the morning? Let each person suggest one simple gesture so that the threshold of our home remains a place of peace.