

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

HANUKKAH

12 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Festive Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Hanukkah: A Jewish Re-education”: why “the G-d of our
fathers” is enough, why one needs a house in order to light, why
we say “ner Hanukkah” and not “ner shel Hanukkah”, and what
small flame remains intact when the transfer of identity threatens.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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Spiritual genes



PRESENTATION

Hanukkah closes the calendar of Jewish festivals, and the Rav sees in it an invitation to a re-education of our identity. An identity that cannot be separated from our history or our forebears, for we carry in our spiritual genes the heritage of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov.

THE QUESTION

If a wall separates the Jewish entity from the nations, is that a form of discrimination?

THE ANSWER

A sorting took place between Yishmael and Yitzchak, between Yaakov and Esav. As a result, the entity Israel is not that of a people that has, in addition, adopted a belief or a way of life: it is the one that, throughout its history, carries the identity of its fathers. That is why there is a wall between the Jewish entity and the entity of the nations.

The Rav makes clear that there is no discrimination in this, still less racism. We are a people of converts.

Simply, whoever enters the Jewish people takes on at the same time the whole past of the people, its whole history, beginning with its patriarchs, its masters, Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Whoever joins the Jewish people takes on at the same time the whole past of the people.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What do we carry, without knowing it, from our grandparents and great-grandparents? Let each person name a character trait or a value he received as a “spiritual inheritance.”

SUBJECT 02

The G-d of our fathers is enough



PRESENTATION

The first blessing of the Amidah begins with “Elokeinu ve-Elokei avoteinu”, our G-d and G-d of our fathers. It does not say “King of the universe.” The Rav sees in it a complete definition of Jewish faith.

THE QUESTION

Why is referring to the G-d of our fathers a reference sufficient in itself — and what did each of the three contribute?

THE ANSWER

“Elokeinu ve-Elokei avoteinu” — our G-d and G-d of our fathers.

When we refer to the G-d of the fathers, we do not need to say “G-d, Master of the universe.” Our G-d, G-d of our fathers, is a reference sufficient in itself.

Avraham is the one who founded belief in a G-d who created the universe. Yitzchak is the one who brought in faith in the Torah, divine service, the covenant made between man and the Creator. Yaakov is the one who founded the house of Israel, the intimacy of Israel.

And a lineage cannot be disowned. What child will disown his father? That is why, even if Israel has sinned, he remains Israel.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Our G-d is the G-d of our fathers, and that is a reference sufficient in itself.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Belief, service, home: which of the three pillars is strongest in our family, and which the most fragile? Let each person say what he would like to receive from his father or mother, and what he would like to pass on.

Three times the people believed



PRESENTATION

On three occasions, the text specifies that the people believed in the L-rd. The Rav sees in this the three foundations of Jewish faith, which correspond to the three pilgrimage festivals: Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot, the three legs on which the whole Jewish edifice rests.

THE QUESTION

What are these three foundations, and why does providence not stop after the exodus from Egypt and Sinai?

THE ANSWER

“You shall serve G-d on this mountain” (Shemot 3:12).

When Moshe announces that the L-rd has heard their cry, the people understand that they are not handed over arbitrarily to the forces of history: there is a Creator who manages history. And they are told in advance that the exodus from Egypt leads to the revelation: you shall serve G-d on this mountain.

But after the exodus and the giving of the Torah, are the people left to themselves? No. The desert is the prototype of exile, and the witness of a providence that does not leave the Jewish people — that watches not only over the people as a whole, but over each individual.

Pesach is the creation of the Jewish people, parallel to the creation of the universe. Shavuot, the giving of the Torah, parallel to the binding of Yitzchak, that unconditional service. And on Sukkot we leave the intimacy of the house for the sukkah, and place ourselves back in the hands of providence.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The people understand that they are not handed over arbitrarily to the forces of history.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Do we feel handed over to the forces of history, or accompanied? Let each person tell of a moment in his life when he felt he was not alone in carrying his destiny.

A festival is not an anniversary



PRESENTATION

There is a principle: every celebration of a festival puts all its features back into force. We do not commemorate a bygone event: we relive it. The Rav applies this to the three festivals of the Torah.

THE QUESTION

What does it mean to “put a festival back into force”, rather than to remember it?

THE ANSWER

“Every day, let them be new in your eyes” — a teaching of our Sages on the words of the Torah.

Every day a person must consider that he is leaving Egypt: the exodus from Egypt is permanent; it did not happen just once in history. We go on living it, with still greater vigor every Pesach.

The same goes for Shavuot and the giving of the Torah: the mitzvot must be for you as if you had received them this very day, with as much freshness, as much life. We relive it all the time, with greater intensity on Shavuot.

And likewise on Sukkot: under the huts, G-d protected the people who had left Egypt, with the cloud that covered them throughout the desert. History bears witness that the Torah has not been forgotten in Israel, that we can re-energize it every day, and that the existence of Israel is a miracle in itself.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The exodus from Egypt is permanent. It did not happen just once in history.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Which festival do we live as a mere memory, and which as something happening to us today? What would we need to “go out” from this year?

Purim answers Shavuot



PRESENTATION

Everything was of great intensity from the exodus from Egypt to the building of the Temple, the bayit where G-d attests His presence within each person. But after the destruction of the Temple, there was a loss of substance, a kind of wearing down. That is where the two festivals added by our Sages come in.

THE QUESTION

What loss did the destruction of the Temple cause, and how do Purim and Hanukkah make up for it?

THE ANSWER

“Kiyemu ve-kibelu ha-Yehudim” — the Jews fulfilled and accepted (Esther 9:27).

In the confrontation with other cultures, there is a lack of unity. Just as the people are condemned to exile, to fragmentation, to dispersion, their Torah too is dispersed, fragmented: one no longer finds a halachah, a mishnah clearly stated; one must search here and there to restore the lost clarity.

Then come the events of Purim. They re-energize the exodus from Egypt and the giving of the Torah: under Haman's threat, the people recover their unity, and this unity is followed by a spiritual awakening. This time it is not G-d who reveals the Torah at Sinai; it is the people who, of their own accord, take it in hand and adopt it for themselves and their descendants.

Just as Pesach and Shavuot, linked by the bridge of the Omer, form a unity, Purim takes up both these parameters. And Hanukkah does the same work for Sukkot.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The miracle of Purim lies in this recovered unity of the Jewish people.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Does a scattered family keep its Torah? What in our home has “worn down” with time or distance — and what event could push us to take it in hand again?

Pure oil, right after Sukkot



PRESENTATION

In Parashat Emor, which deals with all the festivals, right after the laws of Sukkot comes an unexpected passage: “Command the children of Israel to bring you pure olive oil, crushed, for the light, to raise up a perpetual lamp.” What is the connection?

THE QUESTION

Why does the instruction about the oil of the Menorah immediately follow the laws of Sukkot?

THE ANSWER

Vayikra 24:2, right after the laws of Sukkot (Vayikra 23).

The link between this instruction and Sukkot means that the festival of Hanukkah is already recorded here, in parallel with Sukkot. For they have many points in common.

Sukkot lasts eight days; so does Hanukkah. On Sukkot, offerings were brought for the seventy nations, in decreasing number; on Hanukkah the light increases, for in holiness it is better to go upward. In both there is an opening of the light of the Torah to the whole universe, to all of humanity.

And during the eight days of Sukkot we recite the full Hallel, because no day resembles another — whereas on Pesach we say it barely on the first day. Likewise, during the eight days of Hanukkah, we recite the full Hallel.

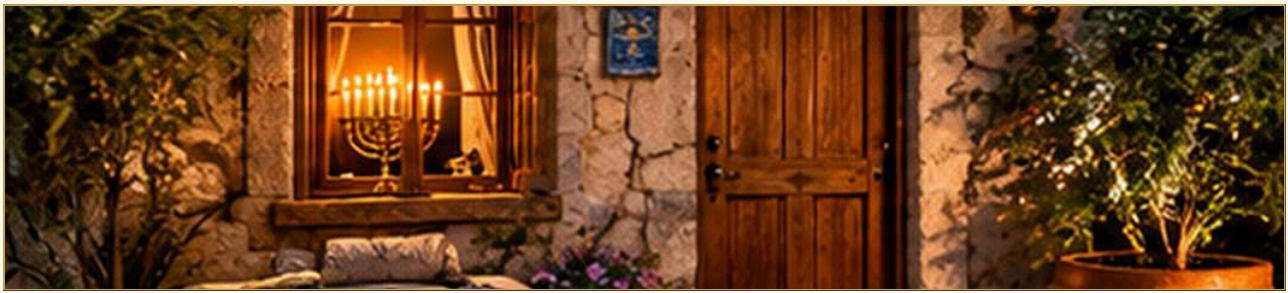
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

There is also this opening of the light of the Torah to the whole universe, to all of humanity.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

“No day resembles another”: do we live our eight days of Hanukkah that way, or all alike? Let us suggest a different idea for each evening, to add to the lighting.

No house, no light



PRESENTATION

Hanukkah aims to publicize the miracle, *pirsumei nisa*. One might think everyone must light, everywhere. Yet the law exempts the person who has no house, and exempts the traveler, for whom the lights are lit at home in his absence.

THE QUESTION

If the mitzvah is to spread the miracle, why tie it to a house?

THE ANSWER

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

What is particular to Sukkot is the intimacy we find again with Hashem, to whom we entrust our destiny, believing in His providence under the clouds of glory. The Hanukkah light comes from the same movement of thought.

We were on the point of losing our footing, of being ashamed of our identity, of breaking the lineage with our fathers. What allowed us to overcome these trials was never, at any moment, to have been embarrassed by our belonging to our history; to have proudly carried our parents' heritage and gone on making it bear fruit.

The whole purpose of the Sanctuary is to attest that the L-rd dwells in each person's heart, in each person's intimacy. That is why someone who has no house, who does not live this intimacy, who remains exposed to every current, is exempt from the lighting.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

One must first live this intimacy with Hashem intensely.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Before seeking to light up the world, the law asks us to have a house. Is ours holding together? What would we need to repair between us before claiming to give something to the outside?

Taking the Torah out of the private domain



PRESENTATION

When the voice of prophecy fell silent, Greek culture sought to take its place. It decided that there was no difference between people, and that it was religions that had dug the ditches. A fraction of the Jewish people, the mityavnim, were won over by this movement.

THE QUESTION

What was the Hellenizers' project, and why did it threaten the very gains of the exodus from Egypt?

THE ANSWER

What the Greek world wanted was to cut off from its root the essence of the culture revealed by Hashem to His people, and reduce it to a philosophy of life. The mityavnim, who had adopted this way of thinking and absorbed reason, gave up, in a movement of openness, the exclusiveness of Jewish destiny: we will approach the text of revelation by other criteria.

The Jewish heritage would no longer be set apart; it would become everyone's domain. That is taking the Torah out of the private domain and putting it into the public domain. It is popularization.

And from there, one had to fear that the Jewish people would lose its identity entirely, and with it all the gains of the exodus from Egypt and the revelation.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

That is taking the Torah out of the private domain into the public domain. It is popularization.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Is sharing everything with everyone always generosity? Are there precious things in our home that lose their value when they are put on display everywhere?

Why “ner Hanukkah” and not “ner shel Hanukkah”



PRESENTATION

At the moment of the blessing, the Vilna Gaon rules on a tiny nuance, the Rav reports: one says “le-hadlik ner Hanukkah”, and not “ner shel Hanukkah.” The reason lies in a word one hears in the first formula, which disappears in the second.

THE QUESTION

What word do we hear in “ner Hanukkah” — and why does Greek thought threaten precisely that word?

THE ANSWER

Ner Ha-nukkah: in it one hears nachal, the stream.

One must say “ner Hanukkah” quite simply in order to preserve the notion of nachal. A nachal is a stream, carrying the waters of the source from a given point to distant lands. It is living water, pure water; it is not stagnant water, not static water.

Yet Greek thought set boundaries to thought, and those boundaries are tum'ah, impurity. The moment you put a stopper somewhere, you have stopped the flow, and that water will build up impurities. It is no longer fit for a mikveh: it must be in constant motion.

It is in that era, that of Mattityahu, that we witness a war within the Jewish people, for this approach had won over the minds of a fraction of the people.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The moment you put a stopper somewhere, you have stopped the flow.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Water that no longer flows goes bad without anyone having soiled it. Where in our family life have we put a stopper — a question no longer asked, a subject we avoid?

SUBJECT 10

The few who would not give it up



PRESENTATION

Al ha-nissim thanks G-d for having delivered “the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few.” The Rav notes a repetition: it would have been enough to say the strong into the hands of the weak. Why add the many and the few?

THE QUESTION

What do our Sages mean by insisting on these “few”?

THE ANSWER

Al ha-nissim: “Gibborim be-yad chalashim, rabbim be-yad me’atim.”

What our Sages meant is that these few, who remained firmly attached to the essence of the law, regarded themselves as the exclusive bearers of the fathers' heritage.

What they carried within them, they would on no account give up. And that is because they believed in this intimacy of life with G-d, whether the Temple existed or not.

For the whole purpose of the Mikdash, the Sanctuary, is to attest that the L-rd dwells in each person's heart, in each person's intimacy. A small number who carry this within them need not be many in order to prevail.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

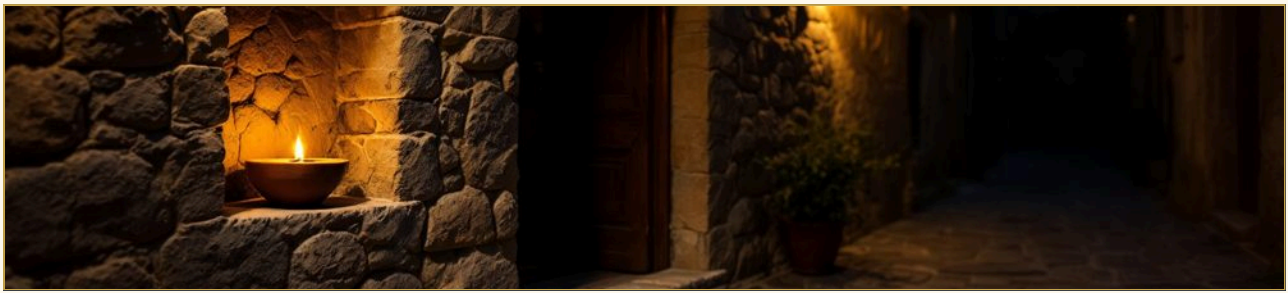
These few, who remained firmly attached to the essence of the law, regarded themselves as the exclusive bearers of the fathers' heritage.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We are sometimes the “few”: alone at the table, at the office, in class, holding on to a value. What helps us not to give it up? And who around us needs our support to hold on?

SUBJECT 11

The transfer of identity



PRESENTATION

In Al ha-nissim, Greece wanted “le-ha'aviram me-chukei retzonecha”, to make them pass away from the laws of Your will. The Rav underlines the verb: not to annul, nor to modify, but to transfer. The Hasmoneans averted that transfer.

THE QUESTION

What transfer is this, through where does it threaten to come in, and what resists it?

THE ANSWER

“Le-ha'aviram me-chukei retzonecha” (Al ha-nissim).

There was a physical transfer of the Jewish people into exile, but there is a far graver transfer: that of thought, from one register to another, from one essence to another. That is the problem we are still struggling with today: not keeping the Jewish heritage in its original purity, wanting to popularize it. But we know that Israel, even if he has sinned, remains fundamentally Israel, because a lineage cannot be disowned.

This transfer threatens us at the door of the house: not on the right side, where the mezuzah is placed, but on the left side, through which all deviations of thought can seep in. That is where the light is placed.

Let your small flame that has remained intact shine through, the one no one can take from you: that of your father, your grandfather, of those who have educated you for generations. An act of kindness is never lost: that is the kindness of the fathers.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Let your small flame that has remained intact shine through — the one no one can take from you.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What “small flask” did we receive from our parents or grandparents, intact in spite of everything? Let each person tell of an act of kindness received in his family that still “bears fruit” today.

SUBJECT 12

Shared or given?



PRESENTATION

On seeing a great sage, we recite a blessing. But the wording changes depending on whether it is a sage of Israel or a scholar of another people, and likewise for a king. The Rav dwells on two verbs: *chalak*, to share, and *natan*, to give.

THE QUESTION

What is the difference between “He has shared of His wisdom” and “He has given of His wisdom”?

THE ANSWER

“She-chalak me-chochmato li-re'av” / “she-natan me-chochmato le-vasar va-dam.”

On seeing a sage of Israel, we bless the One who has shared of His wisdom with those who fear Him; and on seeing a king of Israel, the One who has shared of His glory with those who fear Him. For a scholar or a king of the other nations, we say: the One who has given.

There is a difference between sharing and giving. To share is to be a partner. To give is to pass something from one place to another.

That is the festival of Hanukkah: a small light by which we mark the boundary between the public domain and the private domain — this flask that has remained intact throughout the history of the Jewish people, whatever happened, and that lights up again as soon as we step out of the confusion in which other cultures want to melt us down.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Shared, one is a partner. When we say given, it is from one element to another, from one place to another.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In our family, do we give or do we share? What difference does it make to the one who receives? Let each person name something he would like to share rather than simply give.