

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

HANUKKAH

12 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Festive Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Maoz Tzur, the Song of the Exiles”: why the sage surpasses the
prophet, why the translation of the Bible was a day of mourning,
what the thirteen breaches in the wall mean, and why a seven-day
miracle is celebrated for eight days.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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Themes for reflection and questions to share around the Hanukkah table

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SUBJECT 01

The sage surpasses the prophet



PRESENTATION

Just as Greek philosophy makes its appearance, prophetic thought falls silent; it is condemned to silence. One might think all is lost. But our Sages respond with a surprising formula: “Chacham adif mi-navi”, the sage is greater than the prophet.

THE QUESTION

How could the sage surpass the prophet, who receives the word directly from above?

THE ANSWER

“Chacham adif mi-navi” — the sage is greater than the prophet.

The prophet receives what is transmitted to him from above and reproduces it here below. The chacham, on the other hand, is the one who, by his own means, uncovers prophetic thought. That is what our Sages did through the Oral Law.

And the Oral Law stands beyond the Written Law. The first Tablets of the Written Law were condemned to be broken, because of the golden calf.

So at the very moment Greece claimed to substitute a philosophy for prophecy, the voice of the prophets did not fall silent: it went on resonating on the lips of the sages, who set themselves to uncovering the secrets of the Torah.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The chacham is the one who, by his own means, uncovers prophetic thought.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Receiving a ready-made answer, or seeking it for oneself: which transforms us more? What question in the Torah would we like to dig into together this week, instead of waiting to be given the answer?

SUBJECT 02

The day the Bible was translated was a day of mourning



PRESENTATION

Our Sages likened the translation of the Bible into Greek to the appearance of the golden calf in Israel. The Jews of Alexandria rejoiced at it; the inhabitants of Jerusalem made it a day of mourning. And yet our Sages approved of the undertaking.

THE QUESTION

One and the same event, joy on one side, mourning on the other: why did our Sages nonetheless approve of it, and on what condition?

THE ANSWER

“May G-d enlarge Yefet, and may he dwell in the tents of Shem” (Bereshit 9:27).

The Jews of Alexandria rejoiced at being able to spread biblical teaching throughout humanity. The inhabitants of Jerusalem considered it a way of limiting the reach of the biblical word, by translating it into another language.

Nonetheless, our Sages approved the translation, saying that the beauty of Yefet must dwell only in the tents of Shem. The beauty of Greek thought, of Greek art, of technology, of philosophy can find its place in the tent of Shem — provided there is no will to substitute its own thought for that of the Torah, nor to cheapen revealed thought.

Even commandments that seem natural, like “do not steal, do not kill”, we insist on giving the connotation of revelation, to place them beyond an interpretation reduced to the human plane.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

This beauty of Greek thought could find its place in the tent of Shem, provided there was no will to substitute itself.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There is much beauty in our homes that comes from elsewhere, and it has every right to be there. But under which tent? Let each person name something he let in without setting it any limit.

SUBJECT 03

The festivals we instituted ourselves



PRESENTATION

“Lecha na'eh leshabe'ach”: to You it is fitting to give praise. Our Sages said that if all the offerings were to disappear, the korban todah, the thanksgiving offering, would remain. And some add that if all the festivals were to disappear, Hanukkah and Purim would not.

THE QUESTION

Why would festivals instituted by our Sages be more lasting than the festivals given by the Torah?

THE ANSWER

The other festivals were given by the Creator to the people of Israel, and we served only as receivers. But making the festival something revealed by us and instituted by us ourselves, as Purim and Hanukkah were, is the ideal.

There is, moreover, a resemblance between these rabbinic festivals and those of the Torah. Purim answers Shavuot: the Torah had been given to the people, and the first Tablets were broken; but when the people escaped Haman's attempt at extermination, the Jews committed themselves of their own accord.

And Hanukkah extends Sukkot, the festival of openness, when we leave our homes so as not to curl up around our own values, and aspire to share them with others.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

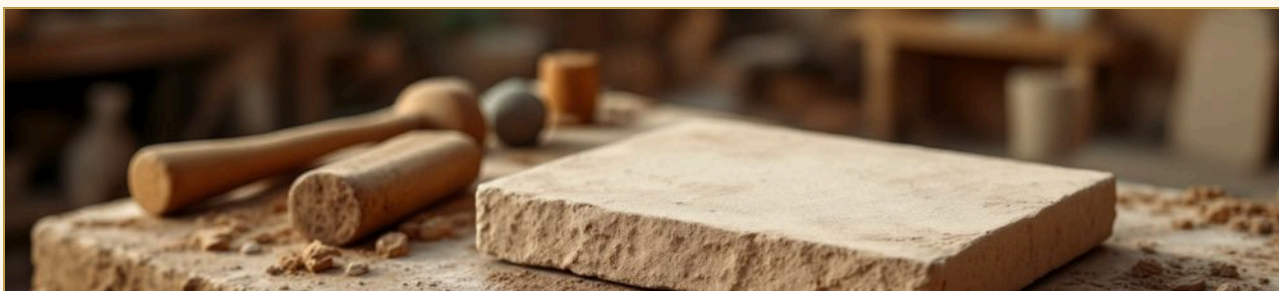
Making the festival something revealed by us and instituted by us ourselves, as Purim was, as Hanukkah was — that is the ideal.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What we receive ready-made we keep less well than what we have built ourselves. What family tradition have we invented together — and which one could we institute this year?

SUBJECT 04

The golden calf was not a change of religion



PRESENTATION

Forty days earlier, the people had witnessed the revelation at Sinai, heard the voice of G-d, felt the dread. And now they bow down before a golden calf. The Rav refuses to see it as mere apostasy.

THE QUESTION

What did the people really do at the foot of Sinai — and why were the second Tablets hewn by man?

THE ANSWER

“Hew for yourself two tablets of stone like the first” (Shemot 34:1).

In reality, the people did not change religion: they simply reduced. They reduced the Torah to their own personal impulses of the heart, to their little faith, to their way of feeling and interpreting it. They did not seek to discover it and decode its secrets. They made it into a cult. And making the Torah into a cult is a golden calf.

This golden-calf movement has not disappeared; it is still present today. It is what lies at the origin of the breaking of the Tablets.

A law reduced to a cult is worthless. So let it be man who shapes the Tablets, and G-d who writes the law on the Tablets man has shaped. For man's contribution is needed, and it is this contribution that will justify the festival of Hanukkah.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Making the Torah into a cult is a golden calf.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Where have we reduced the Torah to a habit, to “our” way of feeling it, without seeking to understand it? Let each person name a mitzvah whose meaning he would at last like to discover.

SUBJECT 05

The woman who was turned away



PRESENTATION

A woman, Timna, asks to enter Avraham's family. Avraham turns her away, Yitzchak turns her away, Yaakov turns her away. She then marries Eliphaz, a son of Esav, so as to belong to this family all the same. From this union Amalek will be born.

THE QUESTION

Why did the patriarchs close the door, at the risk of seeing Amalek born?

THE ANSWER

“And Timna was a concubine of Eliphaz, son of Esav, and she bore Eliphaz Amalek” (Bereshit 36:12).

Our Sages wondered whether it would not have been better to prevent Amalek from being born of the rejection of a woman who wanted at all costs to enter Avraham's family. The answer is that as long as the family is not solidly established, bringing in a foreign element puts its very existence in danger. Newcomers were not admitted, so as not to alter the embryonic makeup of the soul of Israel.

That is also why there were no daughters among the patriarchs' descendants, only sons — with one exception, Dinah, whose fate was tragic.

But when Yosef is born, Yaakov decides to return home, and his name becomes Israel: the name of a completed identity. From then on, the identity can open up.

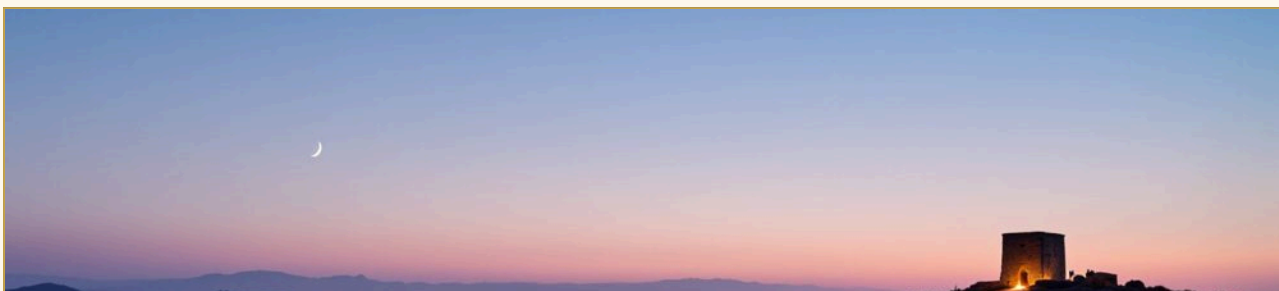
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

As long as the family is not solidly established, bringing in a foreign element puts its very existence in danger.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Must a family, a community, first consolidate itself before opening up? When did we open our door too quickly — or, on the contrary, turn away someone who deserved to come in?

Why did the Greeks go after the calendar?



PRESENTATION

“Yevanim nikbetzu alai”, the Greeks gathered against me, says the song. The Greeks had accepted Jewish thought, but stripped of its revealed character. Their decrees targeted three things: Torah study, milah, and Shabbat along with the calendar.

THE QUESTION

Why does a power that tolerates Jewish thought attack time precisely — Shabbat and Rosh Chodesh?

THE ANSWER

“Yevanim nikbetzu alai, azai bimei Chashmanim” (Maoz Tzur).

For the Greeks, if G-d created the world, He will not stoop to managing it: He has no interest in human problems; it is up to the creatures to take their responsibilities in hand. Greek philosophy therefore reduces all prophetic thought to rational thought; whatever does not obey reason becomes the scrap heap of thought.

Hence their decrees: to forbid Torah study, on the level of the mind; milah, physically; and Shabbat, together with the Jewish calendar.

Now attacking the management of time, which begins with the consecration of Shabbat; ignoring the Jewish people's power to consecrate time through Rosh Chodesh; disparaging milah as a means of perfecting man's creation; stripping study of its character as revelation — this was condemning the Jewish people to assimilation, to existing only as one community among the nations.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

This was condemning the Jewish people to a movement of assimilation.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Who sets the rhythm of our week: we ourselves, or the world around us? What in our schedule still consecrates time instead of merely filling it?

SUBJECT 07

When two lights cross



PRESENTATION

Greece is art, philosophy, mathematics, technology. And yet our Sages called it choshech, darkness. The Rav recalls the meeting between Alexander of Macedon and the Kohen Gadol, who came out to meet him in his priestly garments: a moment when a message could have got through.

THE QUESTION

How can the most brilliant culture of antiquity be called “darkness”?

THE ANSWER

Yavan is choshech, darkness, because it darkened the eyes of Israel.

The Kohen Gadol is said to have told Alexander: careful, there is a way to have these two cultures live side by side, provided one accepts that the voice of the prophets has not fallen silent and goes on resonating through the lips of the sages. Unfortunately, this message was not heard.

That is why it was said that Yavan is darkness: they blinded the eyes of Israel. How could the light of Greece, with all its art and all its science, cast darkness? It is the meeting of two great lights. When two lights cross and one seeks to impose itself on the other, it creates a zone of shadow.

That zone of shadow is all those who gave in to the attractions of Greek thought. That is what “they besieged me” means: a siege not military, but cultural.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

When two lights cross and one imposes itself on the other, a zone of shadow is created.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In a marriage, a friendship, a family, two lights cross. When one seeks to impose itself, shadow falls. Where, in our home, does one brilliant personality unwittingly dim another?

Thirteen breaches that were sealed



PRESENTATION

“U-fartzu chomot migdalai”, they breached the walls of my towers. Around the Sanctuary there were thirteen ramparts, thirteen checkpoints: one could not pass through freely, for there is a hierarchy in the sacred. The Greeks opened thirteen breaches in them.

THE QUESTION

What did these thirteen ramparts correspond to — and why did the Hasmoneans seal the breaches instead of building other walls?

THE ANSWER

The thirteen attributes of mercy, revealed to Moshe after the sin of the golden calf (Shemot 34:6–7).

These thirteen checkpoints corresponded to the thirteen measures by which G-d governs His world, mentioned after the sin of the golden calf. When Moshe asks to know how G-d governs the world, He answers him: here they are, these thirteen ramparts. The Greeks destroyed them; they breached them.

When the Hasmoneans won their victory, they did not build other walls: they simply tried to seal the breaches. Why? Because coexistence between these two cultures is not to be ruled out, provided each recognizes its limits.

Not everyone can enter the Holy of Holies. The Greeks wanted a democracy reduced to uniformity, where nothing distinguishes the levels any longer.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

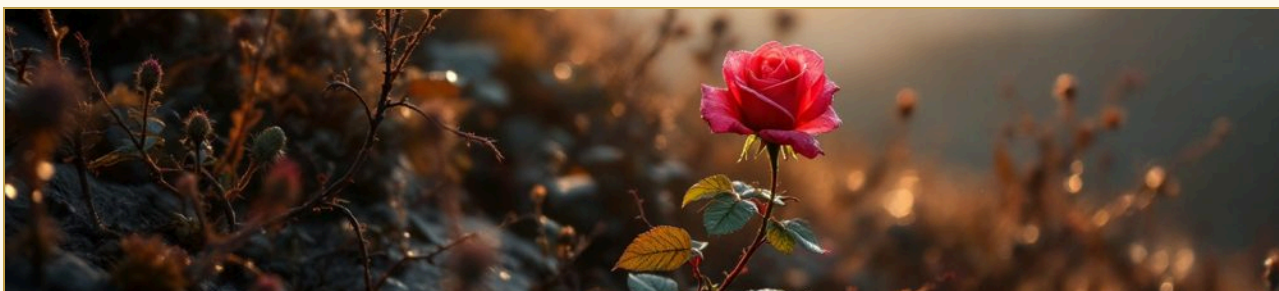
Coexistence between these two cultures is not to be ruled out, provided each recognizes its limits.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

A family needs doors that open and doors that close. What “breaches” have we let open in our home — and must we build a wall, or simply seal them?

SUBJECT 09

“They defiled all the oils”



PRESENTATION

“Ve-time'u kol ha-shemanim”, says the song: they defiled all the oils. The Rav dwells on the word all. An impure oil burns just as well as another. So what did the Greeks really defile?

THE QUESTION

What does “defiling” mean, if not preventing the oil from burning?

THE ANSWER

“Ve-time'u kol ha-shemanim” (Maoz Tzur); the shoshanim, the thirteen-petaled roses of the Zohar.

It is not the material oil that is meant. It is all the lights that could have come from opaque matter and helped light up the world, and that remained in a raw state.

For impurity is when matter does not produce its energy, when it does not develop its potential, when it does not reach its ends.

The Zohar compares the assembly of Israel to the thirteen-petaled rose, which grows with its head held high among thorns and brambles. What they found, “the remnant of the flasks”, was enough to light for one day. It was then necessary to be uncompromising about purity, that is, about the energy that can be drawn from raw matter itself — and this applies to all the elements of creation.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Impurity is when matter does not produce its energy, when it does not develop its potential, when it does not reach its ends.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What in each of us remains “in a raw state” — a talent, an energy, an unused kindness? Let each person name, in his neighbor, an oil that is just waiting to give light.

SUBJECT 10

The flask of oil does not appear in our prayers



PRESENTATION

Everyone tells the miracle of the little flask. Yet the two texts we say around the lights — Haneirot Hallalu and Al ha-nissim — mention it nowhere. And in any case, the Rav recalls, the Menorah could be lit even in a state of impurity.

THE QUESTION

Why is the miracle everyone tells absent from the texts everyone recites?

THE ANSWER

Al ha-nissim: “Rabbim be-yad me'atim, teme'im be-yad tehorim, zedim be-yad oskei Toratecha.”

The mitzvah of Hanukkah is praise itself, and that is what we speak of. Neither Haneirot Hallalu nor Al ha-nissim cites the miracle of the flask: it came later to be grafted onto the primary miracle, that of the victory. The zeal of the Chashmona'im in finding a flask is not even mentioned in our texts.

That the strong should be delivered into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, is a feat. But that the wicked should be delivered into the hands of those who practice the law seems to follow a certain logic.

What the text means is that everything belonging to the natural was inscribed in a supernatural dimension, from the moment the people sought to restore the divine presence in man's thought, in his way of decoding the word of G-d.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

When we light the lights, we know that the mitzvah of Hanukkah is praise itself.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We gladly tell the spectacular stories and forget to give thanks for the essential. In our family, what story is repeated at every festival — and for what have we never said thank you?

SUBJECT 11

The miracle lasted seven days — why do we celebrate eight?



PRESENTATION

The flask of oil held enough to burn for one day. It burned for eight. The arithmetic is simple, and the question is known to all: the miracle itself covers only seven days, since on the first day the oil was enough.

THE QUESTION

Since the first day had nothing miraculous about it, what does this eighth day say that the other seven do not?

THE ANSWER

Even the blessing Asher Yatzar concludes with “mafli la'asot”, who works wonders.

We should not have said that the miracle took place over eight days, but over seven. Except that here the natural joins the supernatural. We consider that even the natural is a *nes nistar*, a hidden miracle, whose message one must know how to read. Everything that seems to us to belong to pure reason contains an element that escapes our understanding. Only the *bnei binah*, those who understand, see the natural as one with the supernatural; and it is because they saw the hand of G-d emerging through events that they instituted songs and praises.

Even the blessing said after relieving oneself joins the most natural bodily fact to the miracle.

These songs were destined to run out of breath after two hundred years, for the Hasmoneans did not remain faithful to their struggle. Our Sages abolished their institutions, but kept this small light at the threshold of our doors.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

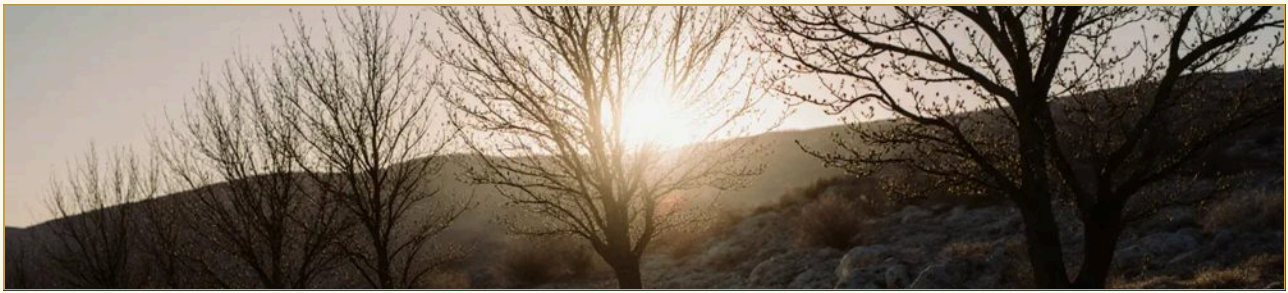
In every victory we win by our own means, there is always a hand emerging through all these events.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Let each person name something in his life that he takes to be perfectly normal — health, a job, someone's presence at this table. How long would he have to lose it to find it miraculous?

SUBJECT 12

Time has its morphology



PRESENTATION

A listener is surprised: how can we be an example to the world when the world hates us? The Rav answers by pointing to the popularity of Hanukkah, celebrated even by those who do not observe. And he goes back to Adam, who saw the days grow shorter as the Tekufat Tevet, the winter solstice, approached.

THE QUESTION

Why do certain moments of the year carry within them, in embryo, events that will be revealed only much later?

THE ANSWER

“Ma’aseh avot siman la-banim” — the deeds of the fathers are a sign for the children.

Adam, after his sin, saw the days grow shorter and darkness envelop the world. When he saw them begin to lengthen, he recovered: the world is not lost; there is a possibility of teshuvah. And he paid tribute to G-d — our Sages connect the eight days of the festival to this.

Just as there is a morphology of the human being, there is a morphology of time and space. Some lands are more communicative than others, and some times far more favorable to certain events. Shabbat was instituted at creation, but its observance took hold only much later. Pesach, say our Sages, was already celebrated by Lot when he welcomed the angels. The day of Kippur is that of the binding of Yitzchak.

These events exist in embryo in time and space, and they are carried by man, as they were by the patriarchs.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We are the carriers. But the moment of revelation has not yet come.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Is there a moment in our family history that already carried, without our knowing it, what happened next? What are we carrying today, in seed, for our children?