

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

THE MONTH OF ELUL

11 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Festive Table

Eleven questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture "Elul: The Uniqueness of Each Person": each Jew is a letter of the Sefer Torah, love changes direction between Nisan and Elul, and the King goes out into the fields to look for His children. All the way to the war the Rav calls the only true one: freeing the soul taken hostage within us.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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SUBJECT 01

One letter is missing, and the whole scroll is unfit



PRESENTATION

“I am my beloved’s”: the Rav opens his lecture by telling his listeners that each of them, individually, is his beloved. For the Jewish people counts as many souls as the Torah counts letters, and in a scroll the slightest break in a letter makes it unfit.

THE QUESTION

If each Jew is a letter of the Torah, how must each one hold his place — and how do we go on writing this scroll?

THE ANSWER

The law of the Sefer Torah: a single damaged letter makes it unfit.

It is important that each person stand out from the other, through his personality, his function, his responsibilities. In a Sefer Torah, each letter has its function within the word: it can bend it one way or the other. And if one individual is harmed somewhere, it is like the break in a letter: all Israel is affected.

What counts first in Elul, then, is to affirm one’s personality in relation to one’s function and responsibilities, within the Sefer Torah we are constantly writing.

For we are in the process of writing it. Each week we give it another connotation, another spirit: we dust it off, we renew it, we breathe a new spirit into it. Just as G-d renews the work of creation every day, we renew this work through the spirit we breathe into the text of the Torah.

THE RAV’S CONCLUSION

We are in the process of writing the Sefer Torah.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Around this table there are people who think nothing would change if they were not there. Let each person say which “word” of the family he bends by his presence. And which page of the Torah did we “dust off” together this year?

SUBJECT 02

On Pesach He comes to us, in Elul we go to Him



PRESENTATION

The Jewish people has two anniversaries: that of its own birth, the exodus from Egypt in Nisan, and that of the creation of the world, in Tishrei. We prepare for each thirty days in advance — but not in the same direction.

THE QUESTION

Why does love change direction between Nisan and Elul — and what changes when we are the ones who take the first step?

THE ANSWER

“Dodi li va'ani lo” (Shir HaShirim 2:16); “Ani ledodi vedodi li” (Shir HaShirim 6:3).

The Jewish people's own anniversary, the one that affirms its birthright, is the exodus from Egypt, in Nisan; we prepare for it thirty days in advance by driving the chametz out of the house. During Nisan we are under the sign of “my beloved is mine and I am his”: it is He who fills me with everything, and I respond to His call. That is Pesach.

Elul, on the other hand, precedes the anniversary of creation, which plunges us into the collectivity of the world. And there it is rather an impulse of the self toward the Creator: “I am my beloved's.” I give myself to Him, and it is in proportion to this giving of myself that I will be able to receive in return.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

I give myself to Him, and in proportion to this giving of myself, I will be able to receive in return.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In our homes there are loves that hold only because the other keeps giving first. Let each person say to whom, this year, he has done nothing but respond. What first step, which no one expects of us anymore, will we take before Rosh Hashanah?

SUBJECT 03

Rachamim, the womb



PRESENTATION

Elul is the month of mercy, rachamim. The Rav recalls that this word comes from rechem, the womb. Mercy, then, is not first of all a feeling: it is a place where something comes to birth.

THE QUESTION

What does it mean to be “conceived” during the month of Elul — and what status does it give us?

THE ANSWER

“My son, My firstborn, Israel” (Shemot 4:22).

Rachamim comes from rechem, the womb. It is there that the deposit of love lies that will give birth to a new being, first called tinok, the baby: the embryo destined to develop and never return to the womb. Well, during Elul we are conceived within the whole world, with a different status, whether we like it or not.

Israel is called firstborn. How many eldest children can there be in a family? Only one. We are the eldest of humanity, and the eldest has rights, but above all he has duties.

Even the name Elul, imported from Babylon, found its place in sacred literature: just as a person converts to Judaism, a culture is converted from the profane to the sacred. That is how Onkelos's Aramaic translation became the first true commentary on the Torah, in a foreign language.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The eldest of humanity has rights, but above all he has duties.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In our family, does the eldest have mostly privileges or mostly duties? And we, as a “firstborn” people, what duties toward the world do we feel entrusted with?

SUBJECT 04

Thinking outside one's own bodywork



PRESENTATION

Cars are advertised today by telling us to “drive outside the bodywork.” The Rav takes up the image: we should first know how to think outside our own bodywork.

THE QUESTION

Where should we look for G-d — and why must we step outside ourselves to find Him within ourselves?

THE ANSWER

The numerical value of Elul is that of binah, understanding: 67.

Let us not look for G-d anywhere but in ourselves: He dwells in us. If one comes to see and grasp Him outside oneself, one is somewhere bordering on idolatry. The true G-d is first of all within us.

But to find Him, one must tear oneself away from the narrow frame of reason. As long as we think things through only from our own point of view, we remain within an enclosure of reason proportional to our intelligence. It is not for nothing that the numerical value of Elul is that of binah: hitbonenut, the reflection that leads a person to disconnect from himself so as to go beyond what he is, and achieve what he was created for.

That is how Rabbi Moshe of Kobrin defined each person's birth: every birthday is tied to the creation of the entire universe, as if G-d were saying: I could not create My world without conceiving you, you, within this world.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We must first know how to think outside our own bodywork.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

On what subject, at home, do we only ever think from our own point of view? Let each person choose a recent disagreement and argue it for one minute in the other person's place.

A permanent present



PRESENTATION

Hebrew expresses time with words that turn: shanah, the year that repeats; tekufah, the period; chag, the festival, which is a circle. The Rav asks: if we undergo this time from outside, where are we ourselves?

THE QUESTION

How can one “bend the past”, if the past is past?

THE ANSWER

Ibn Ezra, cited by the Rav: the past is no more, the future is not yet, the present is like the blink of an eye.

If we undergo this time from outside, in its repetition and its cycle, where am I? In a permanent present. The past no longer exists; the future is yet to come, I do not know what it will be; and the present slips away from me like the blink of an eye. But it is precisely there that I can make the past converge with the future, and reflect on the past in such a way that it lights up the future.

A listener objects: the past is the past. The Rav answers: we are all subject to tragedies we did not want — children lost young, families torn apart, accidents. Every morning we say: “Blessed is He who decrees and fulfills.” Go and say that to someone at the moment of his tragedy...

And yet, with time, we integrate it, because the soul never dies. The particle of infinity we carry from our parents, our brothers, our children is not lost. That spirit we take up again, we set it in another mounting, and we give it a luster it did not have before.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The instrument is lost, but the spirit knows no death.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What past trial in our family sheds light today on the way we live? And what memory of a loved one could we “set in a new mounting” this year — a name, a habit, a good deed?

Blessed the fault of having broken the Tablets



PRESENTATION

On the first of Elul, Moshe goes back up for forty days to receive the second Tablets. This time he must hew the stone himself: only the writing is divine. And the Rav cites the first “yishar koach” in history: the one congratulating Moshe for having broken the first.

THE QUESTION

How can having broken the Tablets of the Law be counted to the credit of the one who broke them?

THE ANSWER

“Hew for yourself two tablets of stone like the first” (Shemot 34:1); “write them on the tablet of your heart” (Mishlei 3:3).

It is paradoxical, but it is wonderful. For the Law does not have to be given in its entirety and imposed from outside: one's own participation is needed to forge it. Having obtained a reprieve for the people, Moshe sets out again on Rosh Chodesh Elul, placed under the sign of mercy and of the recasting of the Jewish people — and this recasting of the people goes together with the recasting of the Torah.

This time the Tablets are not entirely given by G-d. “Hew for yourself”: you, Moshe, will hew the stone, and bring this law within the people's reach, so that it can win their adherence.

That is the meaning of: the Holy One, blessed be He, the Torah and Israel are one. The Torah, you will discover it for yourself; on the tablets of your heart you will write it. It is not enough to reduce it to pure logical knowledge: it must be lived from within, felt, rewritten. And you can do it, because the Holy One, blessed be He, dwells in you.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

One's own participation is needed to forge the Law.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We hold many of our practices from an outside authority, without ever having made them our own. Which one would each of us do differently if he had to “hew” it himself? And which one have we already written on our heart?

Forgiven, or sent away?



PRESENTATION

Elul opens with the selichot. Today, the Rav remarks, people ask forgiveness for just about anything. A commentary brings together two words that Hebrew allows to be interchanged: salach, forgiven, and shalach, sent.

THE QUESTION

What must we “send away” from ourselves for forgiveness to have meaning?

THE ANSWER

Salach, to forgive; shalach, to send — in Hebrew, the sibilants can be interchanged.

It is a matter of giving up this tendency to have everything forgiven, to make ourselves our own accomplices in everything we do. We do not take in the true import of things, because we have not cleaned our kli, our vessel.

Our vessel is the human body. It needs preparation so that the neshamah can unfold within the person with all its intensity. We should rid ourselves of all the dross cluttering our being, of all this pollution surrounding us.

And it is not G-d who examines our hearts. We address the Holy One, blessed be He; He is there to listen; but it is we who must analyze them, and see whether we are truly sincere with ourselves. This self-discovery is the condition for recognizing the Creator as King of the universe.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is not He who is examining our hearts; it is we.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

For what small thing do we always forgive ourselves too quickly? Let each person choose one piece of “dross” to send away from his life between now and Kippur — and only one.

SUBJECT 08

Strict judgment alone is deadly



PRESENTATION

In the prayers of Rosh Hashanah, the Rav remarks, we often meet the names of Avraham, Yaakov, Yosef; Yitzchak, he says, is mainly suggested through the shofar. This is not an oversight: it is a choice about how to present oneself for judgment.

THE QUESTION

Why, on the day of judgment, do we not want to present ourselves under the sign of strict judgment alone?

THE ANSWER

The Tomer Devorah of Rabbi Moshe Cordovero: reproducing the thirteen attributes within oneself.

Our structure of being is as G-d conceived it in His projection into the world: it passes through thirteen garments, thirteen attributes, which we recite while trying to become imbued with them. Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, in the Tomer Devorah, invited each person to reproduce them in his own structure. And Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, Moshe, Aharon, Yosef and David are the structures of man's middot.

Why is Yitzchak only suggested? Because remaining all the time in strict judgment and pure logic is death; it is deadly. That strictness cannot be brought into play on the day of Rosh Hashanah. We want the generosity of Avraham, the chesed of Avraham.

That is why the third facet of Elul is “each man to his fellow, and gifts to the poor”: looking at the other through the prism of our responsibility toward him. Hillel summed up the whole Torah while standing on one foot: you shall love your fellow as yourself.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Remaining all the time in strict judgment and pure logic is deadly.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Toward whom, this year, were we “fair” to the point of being harsh? What would a little of Avraham's generosity change in that relationship this month?

The King is out in the field



PRESENTATION

During Elul, it is said that the King is in the field. He is not sitting in His palace; no one requests an audience with Him: He is making a tour. And He is not inspecting His lands — He is looking for His children.

THE QUESTION

Why does the King leave His palace to go looking Himself for those who should have come to Him — and how can we avoid missing His passing?

THE ANSWER

“Seek the L-rd while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near” (Yeshayahu 55:6).

He is looking for His children, because the notion of father exists only if there are children: without a child, one does not taste the pleasure of being a father. During Elul, the L-rd is within reach of the Jewish people: call upon Him while He is near. And this fellow whom we must love as ourselves is also our first companion: we walk with Him without knowing it.

But we can miss His passing. The Song of Songs tells it: the voice of my beloved knocks — open to me. And I answer: I have already taken off my robe; how shall I put it on again? When at last I make up my mind, my beloved has gone. That is us: we have had many moments we could have seized to give our life another direction.

Yet all is not lost. How is the present expressed in Hebrew? By the beinoni, the intermediate form: a continuous action, always in the process of being done.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

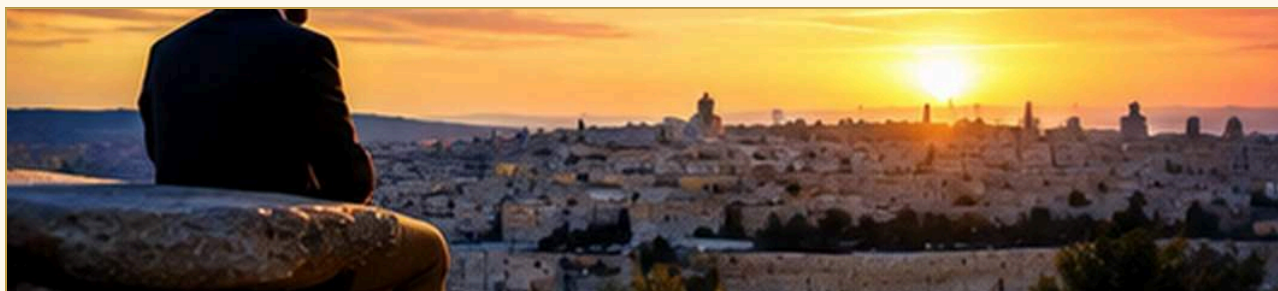
He is looking for His children.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We have all, at least once, found a good reason not to get up and open the door. Let each person name the opportunity he let slip because the timing was bad. Who is knocking at our door right now?

SUBJECT 10

The soul taken hostage



PRESENTATION

The parasha read in Elul says: “When you go out to war and the L-rd delivers him into your hands, you shall take his captive.” Not “you shall take him captive”: you shall take into captivity what was already captive. Among them, a “woman of beautiful form.”

THE QUESTION

Which captive must this war set free — and why speak of a hostage, rather than of a lost soul?

THE ANSWER

“Ki tetze la-milchamah... ve-shavita shivyo” (Devarim 21:10).

Those who waged this war, the Rav recalls, were tzaddikim, with no regrets for the vineyard planted or the house built. They were waging the war of the whole community of Israel: rediscovering the soul held hostage within each one of us. This woman of beautiful form is that soul.

Why hostage? Because we did not give her consideration. We locked her up. She sent us signals, and we silenced her; we did not allow her to find her source again, and we used her like a worn-out garment. You have defeated the enemy outside; but your enemy within — have you defeated it?

The sanctuary of wood and stone was taken from us so that our place of inspiration would not become a small idolatry: find this sanctuary within you; be a walking sanctuary. The path runs through betulah, recovered innocence; tinok, a new birth; and tikkun, restoration — the same letters as tinok.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

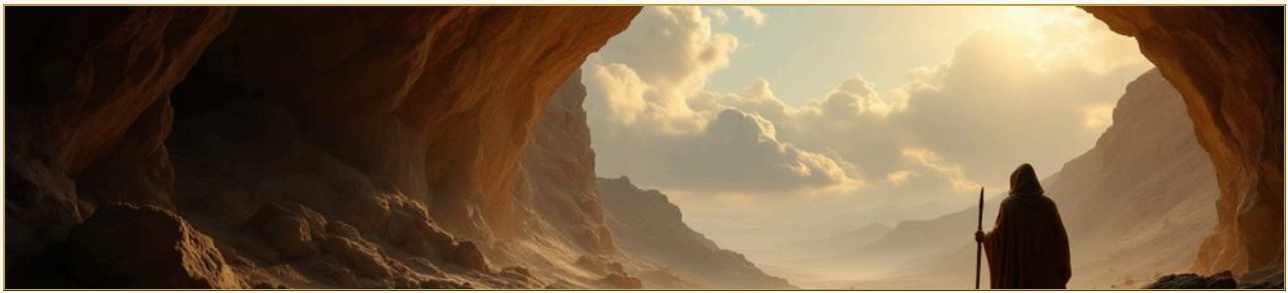
Your enemy within — have you defeated it? That is the true war.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Everyone here has, at least once, silenced an inner voice that was asking for something else. Let each person say which signal he did not want to hear. What outward victory are we proud of — and what did it cost within?

SUBJECT 11

The voice of a thin silence



PRESENTATION

A listener asks: in the synagogue, with our traditions, our melodies, our habits, at what point am I in idolatry? The Rav's answer does not condemn — it puts each thing back in its place.

THE QUESTION

What place should songs and tradition have in prayer — and where is the heart of prayer?

THE ANSWER

“And after the fire, a voice of thin silence” (I Melachim 19:12).

There are two paths in discovering oneself: reason and what lies beyond reason. Study reminds us of the duty to go deeper into the Law; but in the Torah we remain as in a mirror effect: it can be interpreted this way, or otherwise. Prayer has another function: it goes beyond study and establishes direct contact with the infinite. In prayer there are not a thousand and one ways.

As for ritual: one falls into idolatry when one gives in to folklore. The Rav does not disparage it: we need cantors, songs, melodies to enhance prayer. But we must be aware of the place they occupy: all of that is only preparation.

The best moment is that of the Amidah, when everyone is reduced to silence: there one truly faces oneself, and each person plays his own personal symphony. The L-rd is not in the storm or in the thunder: He is in the voice of a thin silence, muted.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is not in the storm, it is not in the thunder that the L-rd is found.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What moves us most in the synagogue: a melody, an atmosphere, or a moment of silence? Let each person say what he would like to tell G-d in his silent prayer on Rosh Hashanah.