

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

THE MONTH OF ELUL

10 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Festive Table

Ten questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture "Elul: The Reckoning of the Year": the twelfth month as the time when the accounts are closed, the sin of the calf as the sin of the circle, reverent fear that is not being afraid, and a Jewish time that is going somewhere. All the way to the call of the selichot: sleeper, do not sink into your sleep.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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SUBJECT 01

The twelfth month, when the accounts are drawn up



PRESENTATION

Elul is the twelfth month counting from Tishrei, and the sixth counting from the exodus from Egypt. At its root, says the Rav, lies the katzir, the harvest: the fruit of the whole year. From the outset he makes it the month of reckoning.

THE QUESTION

What does it mean to “draw up the accounts” of a year, if nothing that was lived can be erased?

THE ANSWER

Elul: the harvest, and in Aramaic, searching, inquiry.

Just as accounts are drawn up in any business, a person must, in the twelfth month, see where he really stands. Elul is the harvest, that is, the yield of the whole year; in Aramaic it is searching, inquiry: the time when we go looking for what the year has really produced.

We are called to renew, to restore our relationship with the text, with the sacred, with the person — with this Adam who dwells in us, this fine Adam being built up from Adam HaRishon. And we are forty days from the giving of the second Tablets, on the day of Kippur.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

A person must, in the twelfth month, see where he really stands.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We all know how to list what we have done; it is rarer to ask what it produced. Let each person name the “harvest” of his year: one thing that truly grew, and one that yielded nothing.

SUBJECT 02

Not consecrating the profane



PRESENTATION

Even before opening the month, the Rav warns against a temptation of every era: updating the teaching of the Torah, confronting it with the problem of the day, presenting it in its most attractive form.

THE QUESTION

What is dangerous about wanting to make the Torah “relevant”?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “We have consecrated the profane rather than the sacred text.”

Whether we like it or not, we always tend to update the teaching of the Torah. And when we update it, we confront it with the problem of the day. This confrontation means that, one way or another, we undermine the originality, the very specificity of the divine word.

Very often, the emphasis placed on form, on expression, on translation, on interpretation has altered the very substance of the divine message. This makes the mitzvot and the word of the Torah secondary to the philosophical interpretation one wants to draw from them. We must be careful.

In embellishing our Judaism, we have fallen into the trap of fine forms, and we have neglected the content. We have tried to sanctify the profane at the expense of what the Torah itself has sanctified.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

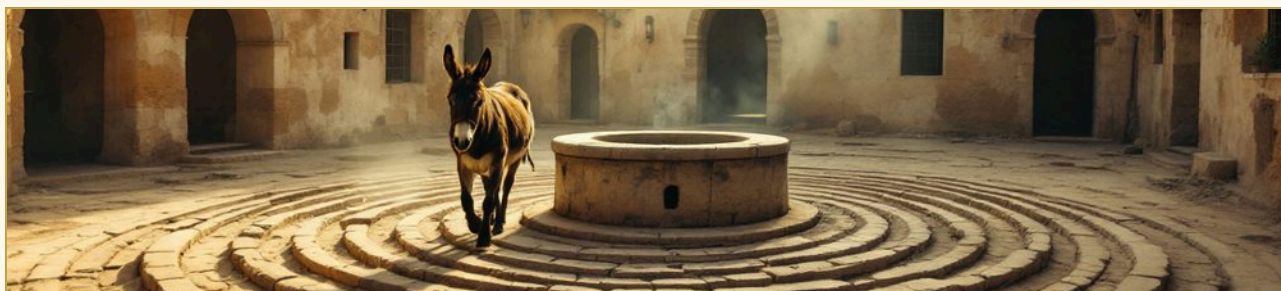
In embellishing our Judaism, we have fallen into the trap of fine forms, and we have neglected the content.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

When we speak of Torah at the table, do we look for what the text says, or for what confirms what we already thought? Let each person cite a mitzvah he loves mainly for its “message”, and say what it truly demands.

SUBJECT 03

The calf, or the sin of the circle



PRESENTATION

On the first of Elul, Moshe is invited to withdraw on Sinai for the writing of the second Tablets. The forgiveness granted then concerns a specific sin: the golden calf. The Rav sees in it a sin that does not belong to the past, because it comes back.

THE QUESTION

Why is the sin of the golden calf a “cyclical” sin — and in what form does it come back among us?

THE ANSWER

Egel, the calf; igul, the circle.

The first Tablets were unsuited: imposed entirely from above, they did not match what the people could really do, what they could take on. The second are accompanied by a movement of return and by forgiveness: forgiveness for the sin of the calf.

This sin is cyclical: it comes back, like the sin of Adam HaRishon. The egel, the calf, is igul, the circle. It is when one settles into a routine, and even the precepts of the Torah are cheapened to the point that we perform them without kavanah, without absorbing them in the depths of ourselves.

The forgiveness of Elul also concerns a confusion: the people confused the holiness of Moshe with that of the Holy One, blessed be He; they projected onto Moshe the power of the Creator. We are bound to respect and revere our teachers and our sages — but not to the point of deifying them, or making them absolute points of reference.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The egel, the calf, is igul, the circle.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Which mitzvah do we perform at home “in a circle”, without thinking about it anymore? Let each person choose one and say what kavanah he would like to put back into it before Kippur.

“Return, O virgin of Israel”



PRESENTATION

The remedy for routine has a name: milat ha-lev, the circumcision of the heart. And the sign of the month of Elul is the Betulah, the Virgin. The Rav reads the two together, in the light of a call from the prophet Yirmeyahu.

THE QUESTION

What can “recovering one’s innocence” mean for a person who has already lived, struggled and made mistakes?

THE ANSWER

“Shuvi, betulat Yisrael” — Return, O virgin of Israel (Yirmeyahu 31).

It is not a play on words: it is an idea our Sages expressed in this quest for innocence. Return, O virgin of Israel: we must recover this freshness of mind.

We face many trials throughout life, and it is impossible not to have dragged dust, sand, mud somewhere into what we have done. All of that must be polished clean in the course of the month of Elul.

For Elul is called the month of rachamim, the month of mercy: the month in which the Holy One, blessed be He, forgave His people.

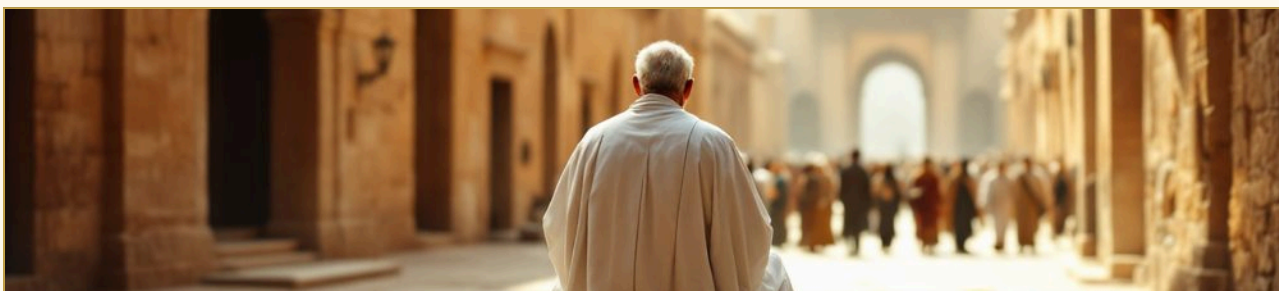
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We must recover this freshness of mind.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What “mud” from this year still clings to our shoes — a quarrel, a grudge, a bad habit? Let each person say what he would like to “polish” before Rosh Hashanah.

Why the Kohen had no land



PRESENTATION

The month of Elul opens with Parashat Shoftim: “You shall appoint judges and officers.” Even today, we pray to have our judges restored as of old. The Rav dwells on those who are meant to serve as a point of reference for the people.

THE QUESTION

Why were those who educate and judge the people to own nothing?

THE ANSWER

“You shall appoint judges and officers” (Devarim 16:18); “the L-rd is his inheritance” (Devarim 18:2).

When justice lets itself be led astray by political considerations, by internal schemes, the people unfortunately no longer has any point of reference. Yet the point of reference is the Kohen, the teacher who educates, the judge: they are the educators of the people, those who set themselves up as models.

That is why the Kohen was not to have a plot of land to work, nor invest in property, nor have any occupation other than devoting himself to the cause of his people. In Israel, it is the L-rd who is their property, their inheritance: they must be at the people's disposal.

The people has the duty to provide for their needs. But the Kohanim were not to be busy with their possessions, their wealth, the wish to receive gifts: justice and education had to be preserved from every subjective tendency, from every particular bias.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Justice and education had to be preserved from every subjective tendency.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Who are the “points of reference” in our home — parents, teachers, grandparents? And what risks making our advice less free: our interests, our comfort, our reputation?

Reverence is not fear



PRESENTATION

At the sound of the shofar, says the Rav, we must recover the yirat shamayim, the fear of Heaven, that we have lost. But the word frightens. Yet our Sages say that the world was created to teach man to stand in awe.

THE QUESTION

What is the difference between reverent fear and being afraid — and why would the world have been created to teach us awe?

THE ANSWER

“Ha-Elokim has made it so, that men should fear before Him” (Kohelet 3:14).

To revere is not to be afraid. Being afraid is a response to an outside threat. Reverent fear, on the other hand, lies quite simply in realizing that not everything depends on us: we are partners in an undertaking, in a purpose, but above man there is a Creator who manages the world, and manages it one day at a time.

Likewise, respect for parents is accompanied by reverence; respect for a teacher too: it is a way of acknowledging his honor. It is reverence that keeps us on edge before a king we respect. How could we not have it before the Master of masters?

True service of G-d is the kind that keeps us on edge in the face of what we do: not out of fear, but because we want at all costs to succeed in what we undertake, and we fear losing our means, failing to come through our trials.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

To revere is not to be afraid.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What is keeping us “on edge” right now — a project, an exam, a child? Is it fear, or the kind of reverence that wants to succeed? Let each person say what he is afraid of getting wrong this year, and why it matters to him.

Calendar pages torn off one by one



PRESENTATION

The Jewish calendar has a peculiarity: the days have no names — day one, day two... — only Shabbat bears one. Nor do the weeks or the years. Only the months have names, borrowed from Babylon and charged with a new meaning.

THE QUESTION

What does it mean to live “on the margins of one’s time” — and why does the Rav see idolatry in it?

THE ANSWER

Shabbat, shemithah, yovel: a time oriented toward the seventh millennium.

A day that passes is not renewed by another day: the next day is different from yesterday; it is another contribution, another time. There is a time without beginning or end, the one that sets the rhythm of the history of all the nations. The history of the Jewish people, by contrast, is structured by a time that has a beginning, a purpose, a goal.

In the week, it is Shabbat; in the cycle of years, shemithah; every fifty years, the yovel, a fresh look at the perspective of history. And all of this aims at the seventh millennium: the eve of the seventh millennium is like the eve of a Shabbat.

We do not live in an empty time that has to be filled: time has a content. Either one embraces one’s time, and one is going in the right direction; or one lives on its margins. For the first definition of idolatry is not seeing a whole in the unfolding of history, and regarding life as the pages of a calendar torn off day after day.

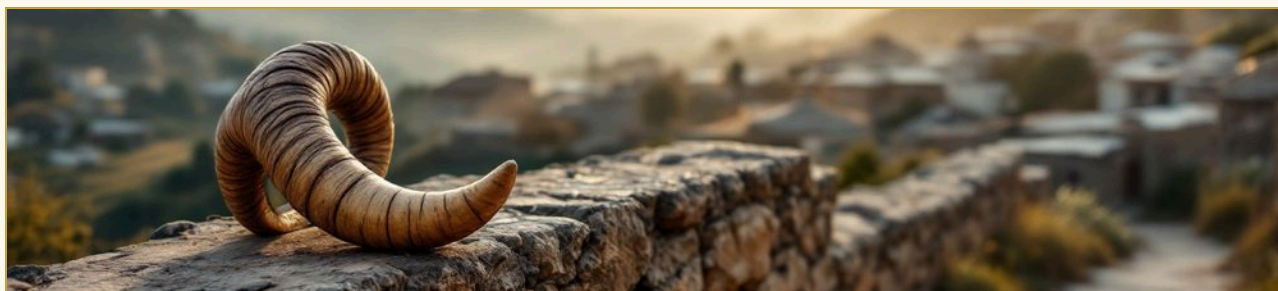
THE RAV’S CONCLUSION

Time has a content.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Does our week look like pages being torn off, or like a road toward Shabbat? Let each person say what this year has “prepared” in him, the way the eve of Shabbat prepares for Shabbat.

The shofar is not a siren



PRESENTATION

The shofar is sounded from the second day of Elul. The Ari zal and Sefer Yetzirah match each month with a human faculty: for Elul it is walking, with the left foot. The Rav draws from this what the shofar expects of us.

THE QUESTION

Against what does the shofar of Elul warn us, and what does it ask us to do?

THE ANSWER

Sefer Yetzirah: the twelve months and the twelve faculties of man.

The shofar is a call to recover the reverence we have lost. When we settle into routine, we suffer from an excessive self-assurance: we think we are masters of everything, and we sin through pride. One may be a man of the law, very observant: we are so comfortably settled in our relationship with Hashem that we come to confuse the “ani”, the I, with the “Atah”, the You.

We then forget the higher dimension of the One who escapes all grasp: that of the transcendent, and that of the future. And we lose all the fruit of the year, the whole harvest of the year.

Elul is walking with the left foot: the month in which man's engagement in the world is put to the test. If a siren sounded in the city, everyone would run to the shelters. The shofar asks you instead to reflect within yourself: you have lost the sense of language, your direction in life — you must take it up again.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We then lose all the fruit of the year, the whole harvest of the year.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In what area have we become so sure of ourselves that we no longer listen to anyone? Let each person say where he feels he “already knows” — and what he might discover there if he set out walking again.

A land desired and feared



PRESENTATION

After Shoftim comes Ki Tavo: “When you come into the land...” The Rav reads in it a tension the Torah does not hide: it longed so much for the people to settle in its land — and it feared it just as much.

THE QUESTION

Why does the Torah fear what it promised: the people's settling in its land?

THE ANSWER

“When you come into the land that the L-rd your G-d gives you as an inheritance” (Devarim 26:1).

The Torah longed so much for the Jewish people to settle in this land — but as much as it longed for it, it feared it. Why? Because taking root in the land and believing that it is thanks to me, thanks to my strength, that we managed to build a country — that is the ruin of the people: its inner ruin.

This is the parasha of curses that we read before Rosh Hashanah, and we conclude it by asking that the year end along with its curses, and that a year of blessing begin.

And the blessing is that however much the Jewish people may want to destroy itself, it endures. G-d watches over it. What is needed is that we become aware of this — and that during these forty days we show the will to get out of routine, out of the daily grind.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

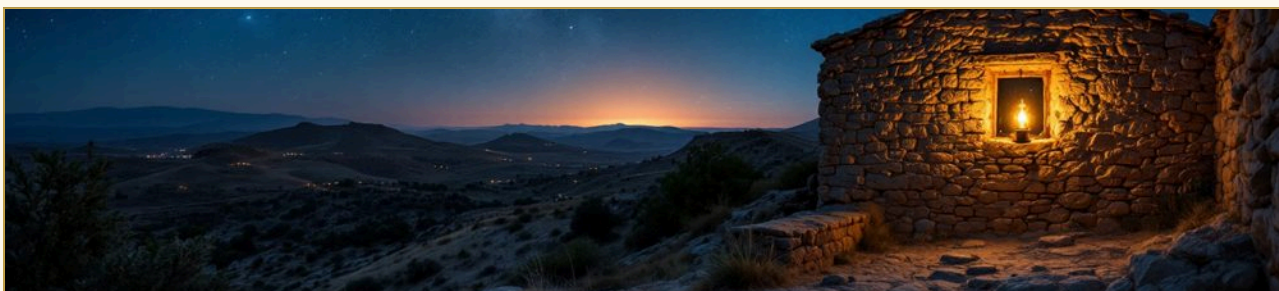
To believe that it is thanks to my strength that we succeeded: that is the inner ruin of the people.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Of which success this year are we tempted to say: “it was thanks to me”? Let each person name those — and the One — without whom it would not have happened.

SUBJECT 10

“Sleeper, do not sink”



PRESENTATION

Selichot begin on Rosh Chodesh among Sephardim — forty days — and a few days before Rosh Hashanah among Ashkenazim. The custom matters little, says the Rav: what counts is the call they carry, as formulated, according to him, by Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi.

THE QUESTION

What does this call ask of the sleeper — and why does it speak to him of a special status?

THE ANSWER

A selichot poem, attributed by the Rav to Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi: “Sleeper, do not sink into your sleep.”

“Sleeper, do not sink into your sleep; abandon your base ways; distance yourself from the way of life of all other men. You are not like them.” Just as you claim a status for yourself and your family, out of dignity, out of self-respect, know that in the family of nations you have a special status.

Lift your gaze to the heights, to serve the Rock who preceded everything; otherwise, will not the glimmers of your own light vanish into darkness? Consider creation anew, its beauty, and draw inspiration from it.

He forged you in His image, be-tzelem: He gives you time to create the Adam, this man whose dimension stretches from one end of the earth to the other, at once universal and in the image of G-d. And it is the selichot, recited every day, that surround and shape this movement of return toward G-d.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Consider creation anew, the beauty of this creation, and draw inspiration from it.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What beauty of creation have we stopped seeing out of habit — a landscape, a face, a meal? Let each person name one, and say what it inspires in him for the coming year.