

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

THE MONTH OF ELUL

12 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Festive Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Elul: The Role of Man”: why we break the Tablets every year,
why each person has a function no one else will fill, why sin
stains only the garment, and what it means to be wise, rich or a
hero. With this certainty of the Rav's: each of us is a mini-
Avraham.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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Themes for reflection and questions to share around the table in the month of Elul

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SUBJECT 01

We break the Tablets every year



PRESENTATION

On the first of Elul, Moshe goes back up Sinai to receive the second Tablets. The Rav opens his lecture with a surprising statement: these Tablets, we too break them, every year.

THE QUESTION

Why must we start over every year — and what do the second Tablets tell us about who we are?

THE ANSWER

The second Tablets: shaped here below; only the writing on them is divine (Shemot 34:1).

We break them every year, for the simple reason that we are not angels. There are aspects that escape us, or that have made our practice grow old: it has worn us out, and we have overused it. So every year we should find again a freshness of mind: the sign of Elul is the Virgin, that of Tishrei the Scales.

The second Tablets have this particularity: they were first shaped here below, and only the writing of the Holy One, blessed be He, appears on them. They are not essentially different from the first, but they are better suited to the capacities of man, who can be an angel only at moments in life.

Ashkenazim begin selichot only four days before Rosh Hashanah: just as an offering is inspected four days before it is presented on the altar, to make sure it has no blemish. And when four full days are lacking, they begin a week before.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We remain fundamentally human, and we are vulnerable.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What practice in our home has “grown old” this year — done out of habit, with nothing left put into it? If we had to inspect it like an offering, four days before bringing it, what blemish would we find?

First, a function



PRESENTATION

Onkelos renders “they shall explore” in Aramaic with the word from which Elul comes. The Rav makes it the program of the month: an exploration of oneself, of man and his capacities. But he sets a surprising order in this exploration.

THE QUESTION

Why does the month of Elul insist first on our function, even before the search for closeness to G-d?

THE ANSWER

Onkelos: “vayaturu”, they shall explore — the Aramaic word that gave us Elul.

Every person answers to a particular mission, and every person is irreplaceable. Contrary to what people think, he has a function to fulfill in this world. That is why everything counts in a Sefer Torah: if a single letter is missing, the Sefer is out of service. And the world is out of service when man does not fulfill his function and makes himself absent.

That is why the Rav insists first not on the search for closeness to G-d, but on the fact that we have a function to fulfill.

And this function we connect to the absolute: without connecting to the absolute we have no point of reference, and we cannot have one.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The world is out of service when man does not fulfill his function and makes himself absent.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What is each person's “function” in our family — the one no one else would fill? And where, this year, did we make ourselves absent?

SUBJECT 03

The two instincts to circumcise



PRESENTATION

The initials of “your heart and the heart of your offspring” form Elul. For the Rav, this circumcision of the heart targets two precise instincts, those that threaten our existence — and the Torah names them again in the Shema: “your heart and your eyes.”

THE QUESTION

What are the two instincts the month of Elul asks us to circumcise?

THE ANSWER

“You shall not stray after your heart and after your eyes” (Bamidbar 15:39).

It is a matter of performing the circumcision on oneself: on one's own speech, on one's desires, on one's excessive pride. For these are the two faults, the two instincts that threaten our existence: the abuse of ta'avot, desires, and too high a regard for oneself.

This excessive regard means not knowing how to take the real measure of one's own capacities; it means being overcome by envy, by the spirit of competition, remaining the reflection of an environment, of a society, running with others along paths that are not ours.

The third section of the Shema names them: not to stray after your heart and after your eyes. The eyes express man's own desires; the heart, excess in appraising oneself. A certain self-esteem is entirely necessary, the Rav specifies — but not in excess.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

A certain self-esteem is entirely necessary, but not in excess.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What path are we running along right now only because others are running along it? And what in us is healthy self-esteem — and what overflows?

SUBJECT 04

The measure of a man is what he gives



PRESENTATION

The third aspect of Elul our Sages found in the initials of “ish lere'ehu umatanot la'evyonim” — each man to his fellow, and gifts to the poor. Not a law of Kippur: a rule of Purim.

THE QUESTION

Why is the month of personal reckoning measured by what we give to others?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “A man is measured first of all by the scale of his generosity.”

A man is measured first of all by the scale of his generosity, by his giving to the other. These three parameters of Elul echo man's relationship with his fellow and with G-d — for the nearest fellow, par excellence, is G-d.

This giving we try to live at our own level within the couple, for that is where giving is realized. And in reality, in giving we are only receiving: the one who receives is the one who gives. That is true love within the couple, which we try to carry over into our relationship with others.

What gives our life a possibility of measure, an axis, a verticality, is that we have the measure of a gift.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The one who receives is the one who gives.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What did we receive this year by giving — time, help, a listening ear? Let each person name a gift that enriched him more than the one who received it.

SUBJECT 05

Thought expires, love does not



PRESENTATION

Why measure someone by his heart rather than by his intelligence? The Rav answers with an almost commercial comparison: for some things, there is an expiration date.

THE QUESTION

What in us does not grow old — and what should we do with it?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “There is an expiration date for thought.”

The idea we have of another person is not his capacity to think. Thought has a certain permanence, but it remains limited in time: there is an expiration date for thought.

There is none for love, for the impulse of the heart. That is permanent, valid for all times. It does not grow old, it does not wear out. It must, of course, be reactivated.

For the feelings we carry are always the same: we have not changed them. It is not like an idea that one transforms, adjusts, corrects. It is a fact.

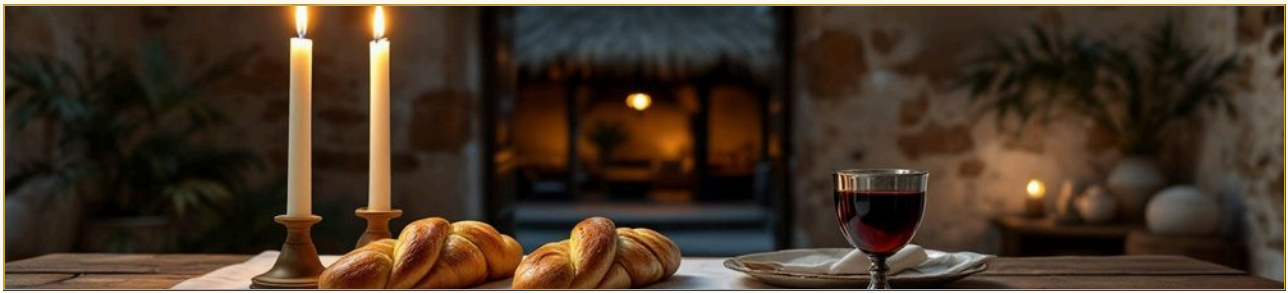
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

There is no expiration date for love.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What idea, defended passionately a few years ago, have we since abandoned? And what attachment, on the contrary, has not budged and only needs to be reactivated this month?

Knowing one's place, and filling it well



PRESENTATION

The month's first demand, says the Rav: to realize what we are, in space and in time. Then to know what we carry within us. And this is inscribed in three moments of the Jewish year.

THE QUESTION

What does “knowing one's place” mean, if not belittling oneself?

THE ANSWER

Tzelem u-demut Elokim: man made in the image and likeness of G-d (Bereshit 1:26).

The true sage is the one who knows his place and fills it well. Next, it is the one who knows he bears the tzelem u-demut Elokim, the image and likeness of G-d, and who places value on his own person: he does not cheapen it, he does not diminish it; on the contrary, he seeks to value it as it deserves.

These stages are inscribed in man's life. Shabbat is the sanctification of time. The Temple we carry with us, since we always seek to give our home a sacred dimension — and we live it at Sukkot, a dwelling in time. And realizing one's creation in the image of G-d is Rosh Hashanah.

Elul is the period of preparation for all this: for living this relationship as G-d's companion.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The true sage is the one who knows his place and fills it well.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Let each person name something he does well and tends to play down. And a place he occupies in our home without really filling it well.

SUBJECT 07

From couple to father, from father to sukkah



PRESENTATION

Elul prepares, according to the Rav, three ways of living the relationship with G-d, which follow one another within a few weeks: on Rosh Hashanah, on Kippur, on Sukkot. Three ways of being together, each more intimate than the last.

THE QUESTION

How does the relationship with G-d change in nature between Rosh Hashanah, Kippur and Sukkot?

THE ANSWER

“As a father has compassion on his children” (Tehillim 103:13).

It is first a relationship of a couple, for which we prepare for Rosh Hashanah. On Kippur it becomes a relationship of father and son: as a father has compassion on his children. And we know that man discovers the relationship of father only with his first child: it is the firstborn who gives the parents the title of father and mother.

Then comes Sukkot: our house is built, but at the threshold of the door, at the mezuzah, not between four walls. Now, like a ben bayit, as if we were members of the household, the Shechinah settles in our dwellings.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In our home, who is “family” without living there, and who lives there without feeling like family? What could we do this year so that our threshold is a place of welcome?

Sin stains only the garment



PRESENTATION

Every morning we say: “the soul You have given me is pure.” And yet we spend weeks asking forgiveness. We speak of kapparah, covering the sin, as one repaints a dirty wall with a fresh coat.

THE QUESTION

If covering is enough, why speak of purity — and if the soul is truly pure, what is left to erase?

THE ANSWER

“You shall see My back” (Shemot 33:23).

Kapparah means covering: like a dirty wall over which one applies a fresh coat to hide everything. Here, no: there is a possibility of erasing. Why? Because sin does not reach the essence of Israel: it stains only its garment. If I were not aware of the purity of the soul, I could never erase what I have written.

We are too inclined to regard forgiveness as something G-d could give us without our making the effort ourselves to erase, to restore, to repair — with His assistance, but by ourselves.

Of any person, we perceive only the garment: his qualities, his virtues. And G-d we discover only through His thirteen attributes: you shall see My back. But they remain abstract if we do not carry them over onto ourselves: without showing chesed ourselves, we can recite all the prayers we like; it means nothing. Our soul remains intact; we need only remove what hides it.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Sin does not reach the essence of Israel. It stains only its garment.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We often confuse our faults with ourselves, and that is why we do not touch them. Let each person name something he believed himself permanently guilty of that was only a garment. Do we ask forgiveness to be let off, or to truly erase?

Shanah: repeating differently



PRESENTATION

The Rav refuses to say “new year.” The word shanah, year, comes from a verb meaning to repeat. Would Rosh Hashanah then be a mere return of the same?

THE QUESTION

If the year is a repetition, what in it can be new — and what becomes of the past?

THE ANSWER

Devarim, called Mishneh Torah: Moshe's repetition of the Torah.

Shanah comes from the verb shanah, to repeat. It is a repetition, but the repetition of a cycle once I have given it a different content. Look at the book of Devarim: it is called Mishneh Torah, a repetition of the Torah by Moshe. And yet it is totally different, with other nuances, other laws.

Day after day, we complete what remained deficient; we do not wholly erase what we have done. Our Sages even asserted that zedonot, intentional sins, become shegagot, unintentional ones — and can even become zechuyot, merits, through the lesson they taught us and that we keep moving beyond.

That is the true meaning of Rosh Hashanah: a new beginning, a new cycle, but one that does not break with the past. On the contrary, it gives the past another meaning, another dimension.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

A new beginning that does not break with the past: it gives it another meaning, another dimension.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What mistake this year taught us something we would not have learned otherwise? Let each person name one, and say what it could become if he turned it into a merit.

SUBJECT 10

Each person is a mini-Avraham



PRESENTATION

We often believe that history is made by masses, movements, large numbers. The Rav recalls that Avraham was alone — and he draws from this a rule for each of us.

THE QUESTION

What can a single person do for the repair of the world?

THE ANSWER

“Avraham was one” (Yechezkel 33:24).

The companion par excellence is the Holy One, blessed be He, the One who accompanies us all the time. He has nothing to receive; but our giving fulfills His will: to have much nachat, as a father feels satisfaction when his children succeed in life. It is the nachat He feels from all His creation.

Yet this does not rest on the masses. It is not a clan. It rests on the “ani”, on the “Ani ledodi”: everything depends on me. Avraham was one. He waged his battle, and today each of us is a mini-Avraham, able to achieve extraordinary things for tikkun olam, the restoration of this world.

One should not minimize what one does: it is always important. Just as an insignificant microbe can destroy a whole life, the positive act one performs can heal and restore a whole world.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The positive act one performs can heal and restore a whole world.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What small gesture by one of us changed something this year, without his knowing it? Let us tell him tonight. And what gesture could each person make alone, without waiting for others to follow?

SUBJECT 11

Three ways of loving G-d



PRESENTATION

The Shema has three sections. The Rav reads them as three approaches to divine service — three ways of standing before G-d, which are not of equal worth.

THE QUESTION

How can we verify that we truly love G-d, and not what we expect from Him?

THE ANSWER

“You shall love the L-rd your G-d” (Devarim 6:5); “I will give the rain of your land in its season” (Devarim 11:14).

In the first section, no reward is promised to one who loves G-d and shows it from morning to night. How can one verify that one loves Him? By arousing appreciation and love around oneself: if people are won over by your way of acting, of teaching, of applying the law, by your moral path.

The second section introduces reward and punishment: rain in its season if you follow My path, its cessation if you abandon it. This is an approach for those who see in the Law a lifeline for their material success. G-d becomes the benefactor who gives or punishes — and then it is no longer love; it is fear, dread.

The third is that of the tzitzit, of the garment. It recalls the exodus from Egypt and warns: if you use Judaism like a garment, you may have mastered your desires here and there, but you are only at the starting point.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What does our way of living Judaism make others want to love? And is there a practice we do mainly “so that things work out”?

SUBJECT 12

The wise, the rich, the hero



PRESENTATION

The Rav had said that at Nitzavim, everyone stands on an equal footing, from the leader to the water-drawer. A listener objects: is Judaism not full of hierarchy — Kohanim, Levi'im, Yisrael?

THE QUESTION

Should hierarchy be respected — and how far?

THE ANSWER

“Who is wise? One who learns from every person...” (Pirkei Avot 4:1).

There is a hierarchy that we respect, but do not worship: a Kohen can be a false Kohen, a prophet a false prophet, a judge a bad judge. We respect it insofar as it is deserving, when it commands respect by itself. It is written: let the fear of your teacher be like the fear of Heaven. But in the way you function, you must not be dependent on your teacher.

Our Sages could have said: the wise man is one who has a master to think for him. No: he would be dependent on him. The wise man is one who learns from every person. The rich man is not the wealthy one, dependent on his fortune, but one who rejoices in his portion. The hero is one who masters his inclination — and that inclination is himself.

Man therefore fulfills himself through himself: he is dependent on no one. That is also why, at Nitzavim, everyone stands on an equal footing, from the woodcutter to the water-drawer.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Man fulfills himself through himself. He is dependent on no one.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

From whom did we learn something this year without expecting it — a child, a neighbor, an opponent? And on what have we become “dependent”, to the point of no longer knowing how to do without it?