

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:

When the Curse Is a Blessing”: the secret revealed to Rabbi

Shimon bar Yochai, the exile that came before its due date, the shofar that drives in and makes us tremble, and the four acrostics of the month — all the way to the refuge offered to one who did not want the harm he caused.



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

When the curse is a blessing



PRESENTATION

Every year we wish: may the year end along with its curses, and may the year begin along with its blessings. Yet the section of curses read just before Rosh Hashanah, Ki Tavo, ends with no consolation, unlike the one that precedes Shavuot.

THE QUESTION

How can we wish for the end of the curses, when the text we read promises none?

THE ANSWER

The question put to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, who had taken refuge in his cave.

The question was put to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, hidden with his son for fear of the Romans. He did not know what to answer: he began to weep and fell into a deep sleep, until the prophet woke him. In the second curses there is a secret: if there is no real consolation, it is because the curse is in itself a blessing.

Our Sages expressed this with an image. When you throw a ball hard against a wall, it comes back to you, less forcefully, but it comes back: it cannot destroy the wall. Since the golden calf and the breaking of the first Tablets, a decline has been hurling us toward Tishah be-Av; we are on a slippery road.

But at that moment there arises G-d's promise never to separate the future of the Jewish people from the very existence of creation. The falling movement meets this primal force, which pushes it back very hard. It is no longer possible to slide: one must pull oneself together.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The curses are in fact, in their essence, a blessing.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We have all hit a wall this year: a closed door, a refusal, a loss. Let each person name the wall he was thrown back from. Did that wall make us climb back up, or have we stayed angry at it?

SUBJECT 02

Exile, two years before the due date



PRESENTATION

On the 9th of Av we read: “When you have begotten children and grandchildren, and you have grown old in the land...” The Rav dwells on this growing old: it could have led the people to its own destruction. Why did it not?

THE QUESTION

Why did G-d exile His people before the threat came to pass?

THE ANSWER

“Ki tolid banim u-vnei vanim ve-noshantem ba-aretz” (Devarim 4:25).

Ve-noshantem, you will have grown old, shares its root with shenah, sleep: this state of indolence and routine is in fact the greatest danger. For children and grandchildren live in conditions different from their parents': the world moves forward, He renews the work of creation every day, and one generation is not the one before it.

This growing old could have led to the self-destruction of the Jewish people. But the Holy One, blessed be He, saw to it that it did not lead to death: two years before the threat materialized, He exiled His people from its land.

This exile is a way of reconditioning the people elsewhere, so that it may rethink itself anew and decide on its own a new direction — the one that will bring it back to its land.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

This exile is a way of reconditioning it elsewhere, so that it may rethink itself anew.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Sometimes a departure, a move, a break “reconditions” us better than a year of effort. Which one, in our family, turned out to be a new beginning? And where are we at risk of falling asleep right now?

SUBJECT 03

Disappearing without dying



PRESENTATION

What is the disappearance of a people? We think of physical annihilation. For the Rav, there is another kind, quieter, and it is this one that trials seek to prevent.

THE QUESTION

What is the real disappearance that threatens the Jewish people — and why can it not go all the way?

THE ANSWER

“As the new heavens and the new earth... so shall your offspring and your name endure” (Yeshayahu 66:22).

The disappearance of the people among the nations is the moment when the Jewish people wants to become like the other nations. It is there, melted into the nations, assimilated among them; no one any longer distinguishes between a Jew and a non-Jew. That is its form of disappearance.

Yet the Holy One, blessed be He, promised that the Jewish people will never disappear: like the new heavens and the new earth, its offspring will always be present. The Jewish people is bound to the physical existence of this world; one cannot for a single instant imagine its disappearance.

So when G-d imposes harsh trials on His people, it is never to banish it from the earth, but always to allow it to survive, to come through its trials and renew its life energies.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is never to banish it from the earth, but to allow it to renew its life energies.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In what ways are we, at home, still different — in our calendar, at the table, in our speech? And what is quietly making us, little by little, “like everyone else”?

Grace, even without merit



PRESENTATION

In the selichot a formula recurs constantly: “because of Vaya'avov.” Vaya'avov is the first word of the passage of the thirteen attributes of mercy revealed to Moshe. For the Rav, it is the first of the two means that preside over the forty days.

THE QUESTION

What exactly are we asking for when we invoke the thirteen attributes — something owed, or a grace?

THE ANSWER

“I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will show mercy to whom I will show mercy” (Shemot 33:19).

When Moshe asks G-d for the secret of His conduct toward Israel, He answers him: I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, I will show mercy to whom I will show mercy. Our Sages interpreted it this way: I will grant grace even to one who does not deserve it, mercy even to one who is not worthy of it.

So there comes a moment when the Holy One, blessed be He, Himself sets aside the threat — “Let Me be, I will destroy this people” — and grants His grace. Moshe had intervened to ask for a reprieve for the people, and G-d promised him it would be so.

That is why in our prayers we say: do this for us, grant us that, since You promised it to us. We recall Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov and David, and always “because of Vaya'avov”: because of that promise made to Moshe.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

I will grant grace even if he does not deserve it.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

To whom did we grant something this year that he “did not deserve”? And from whom have we received such a grace without ever thanking him?

SUBJECT 05

The ox and the donkey



PRESENTATION

The second means of these forty days is the shofar. Our Sages say it is sounded to “confound the Satan.” The Rav specifies who this Satan is: not some distant being, but two tendencies we know well.

THE QUESTION

Against which two tendencies is the shofar sounded — and why is one no better than the other?

THE ANSWER

“The Satan, the evil inclination and the angel of death are one and the same” (tractate Bava Batra 16a).

The Satan is the one who nurtures pride in us, an excessive self-importance. He is then like an ox charging at man: the active tendency, the one that wants to sweep everything away.

Or else he takes the form of the donkey, the chamor: the one who has chosen to put up with things, to stay in his place, to carry the burden without paying attention to anything, without staying alert. He bears everything, but he is indifferent. That too is the angel of death.

The sound of the shofar throws both these tendencies, the one active, the other passive, into confusion. It comes to disturb both the momentum of pride and the torpor of indifference.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Are we more of an ox — charging ahead, wanting to be right — or more of a donkey — putting up with everything and no longer noticing anything? Let each person say it of himself, and not of others.

Trembling is not being afraid



PRESENTATION

“Shall the shofar be sounded in a city and the people not tremble?” asks the prophet Amos. To understand this trembling, the charadah, the Rav goes back to the first appearance of the verb in the Torah.

THE QUESTION

What “trembling” is the shofar meant to provoke, if not fear?

THE ANSWER

“Im yitaka shofar be-ir ve-am lo yecheradu” (Amos 3:6); “Yitzchak trembled with a very great trembling” (Bereshit 27:33).

The verb appears for the first time when Yaakov, dressed in Esav's clothes, comes before Yitzchak to take the blessing: Yitzchak was seized with trembling to the utmost degree. His whole plan had just been thwarted.

We find it again when Yosef's brothers, coming back up from Egypt with their sacks of grain, discover their money in their sacks. They wonder what is being prepared for them: they thought they were in the right current of history, and it turns out they were not.

Charadah, then, is that jolt that halts the course of a fact, of an event, and forces one to rethink it differently, to place it differently. That is the power of the shofar. And the charedim of the prophet are those who tremble in this way at the word of G-d.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Charadah is that jolt that halts the course of an event and forces one to rethink it differently.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What event this year “stopped us in our tracks” and forced us to revise our plans? Did we truly rethink it, or did we just wait for it to pass?

A sound that cannot become a word



PRESENTATION

During Elul, the shofar is sounded every morning. The shofar is not a musical instrument: it joins with no melody. And the verb used for sounding it, *taka*, literally means “to drive in.”

THE QUESTION

Why does it take a sound that cannot be translated into any word to awaken a person?

THE ANSWER

The three stages of speech: neshamah, ruach, nefesh.

There are three stages in the manifestation of speech. First, breathing: the child has his breath but has not yet articulated it; he expresses his needs only through his cries. Then he articulates this breath; he gives it a body. The shofar is the first neshamah of speech, when it is still expressed only through moans and cries: speech in its gestation.

Why do we speak of “driving in” the shofar, as one drives in a stake? Because we have adopted a formal language that allows us to dress up every situation, to politicize our speech, to seduce, to lie, to deceive. To fight this language that has grown out of all proportion, a new sound is needed.

Today children play with the shofar, and contests are held for the best shofar blower. But the shofar is the outpouring of the soul: what the soul can express from its very depths.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

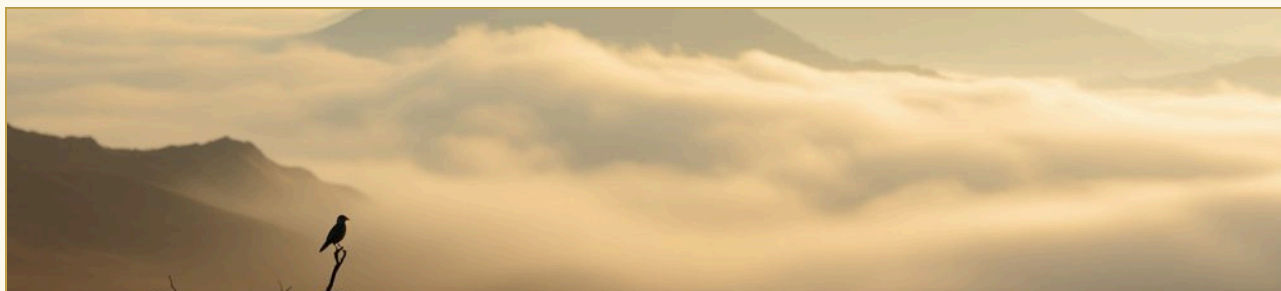
The shofar is the outpouring of the soul.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We all speak a language that smooths things over: at work, with those close to us, with ourselves. Let each person own up to a phrase he repeats that dresses up a situation. What would lie behind it, if we let it out like a cry?

SUBJECT 08

Forty days to learn to speak again



PRESENTATION

At Sinai, as the sound of the shofar grew ever louder, the whole of creation fell silent. The Rav links this silence to the forty days of Elul, which all communities, whatever their customs, open with the shofar.

THE QUESTION

Why are the second Tablets, according to the Rav, first of all a “second language”?

THE ANSWER

“The sound of the shofar grew louder and louder” (Shemot 19:19).

At the moment the Torah was given, the sound of the shofar grew louder and louder. Not a bird chirped, not a beast made a sound, the earth stood still: the whole of creation. It was necessary to re-create, to find language again.

It is this movement of re-creating language that leads to the second Tablets, the second dibrot: a second language, a second dibbur. The first was falsified, distorted; now it must be restored in another way.

Apart from the texts, which vary from community to community, and the dates on which selichot begin, one thing is unanimous: forty days before the restoration of sound communication between G-d and man, the shofar is sounded. The world was created through speech; speech must be given back its creative power, from Rosh Chodesh Elul until Kippur.

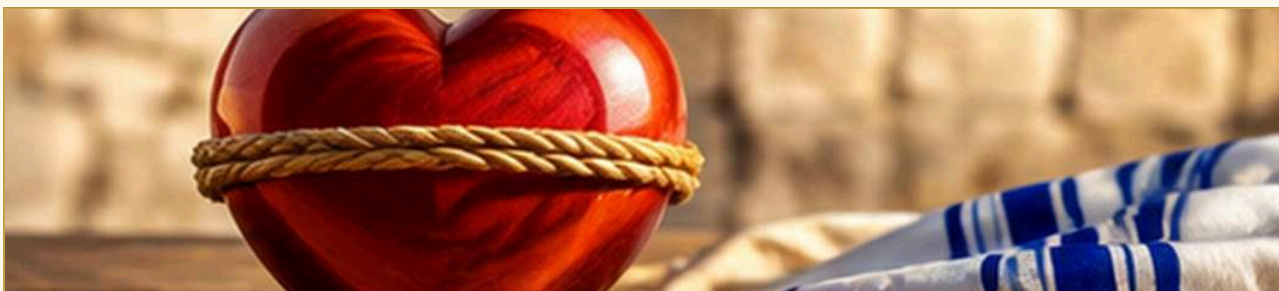
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It was necessary to re-create, to find language again.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What words were “distorted” in our home this year — a promise, an “I love you”, an “it's nothing”? Which one would we like to restore before Kippur?

Circumcising the heart — one's own and one's children's



PRESENTATION

Of fifty-seven biblical acrostics of the name Elul, four are retained. The first, “Ani ledodi vedodi li”, speaks of love; the second, “the L-rd will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring”, speaks of what we pass on. The Rav reads them together.

THE QUESTION

What can it mean to circumcise a heart — and why does the same operation involve the children's heart?

THE ANSWER

“Umal Hashem Elokecha et levavecha ve'et levav zar'echa” (Devarim 30:6).

The first falsification threatening one's being is that of love, when there is no longer any reciprocity. The relationship we live with G-d in the absolute, we live in miniature in the couple; this love must be given the meaning of holiness. And if this love fails, it is the children who suffer the first consequences.

Circumcision means going against what nature gives. Man must not be left in his raw nature: he must be taught to love, not to remain insensitive, not to kick over everything the parents have built, and the new generations must be encouraged toward the parents' true heritage. “It is difficult,” the Rav repeats.

Elul therefore commits us not only to giving our love an impulse of holiness, but to placing greater emphasis on the education of our children, who hold our future.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

If this love fails, it is the children who suffer the first consequences.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Our failings do not stop with us: they carry on in the home, in what the children believe is allowed. Let each person name the trait he does not want to see passed to the next generation — and the one he absolutely wants to hand down.

SUBJECT 10

Reciprocity breeds only violence



PRESENTATION

The third acrostic comes from the Megillah of Esther: “each man to his fellow, and gifts to the poor.” The Rav reads in it communal life: a movement of unity in which each person recognizes himself through his fellow.

THE QUESTION

Is a covenant between equals, in which each gives back exactly what he receives, not the fairest form of relationship?

THE ANSWER

“Ish lere’ehu umatanot la’evyonim” (Esther 9:22).

There is a movement of unity of the Jewish people in which each recognizes himself through his fellow, and a generosity toward those who lack everything. But careful: there are different kinds of lack — a lack of consolation, an intellectual lack, a lack of means of subsistence.

Our communal life can recover its communication, its unity, only through a giving of oneself. “I often say it,” says the Rav, “reciprocity breeds only violence.” You told me, I told you; you did this to me, I did that to you; I pay you back in your own coin. It is the worst way to behave.

One must know how to be in a covenant, a covenant of chesed. A covenant binds both parties; but the Rav sees it differently: not in total equality, but rather in an inequality in favor of the other.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

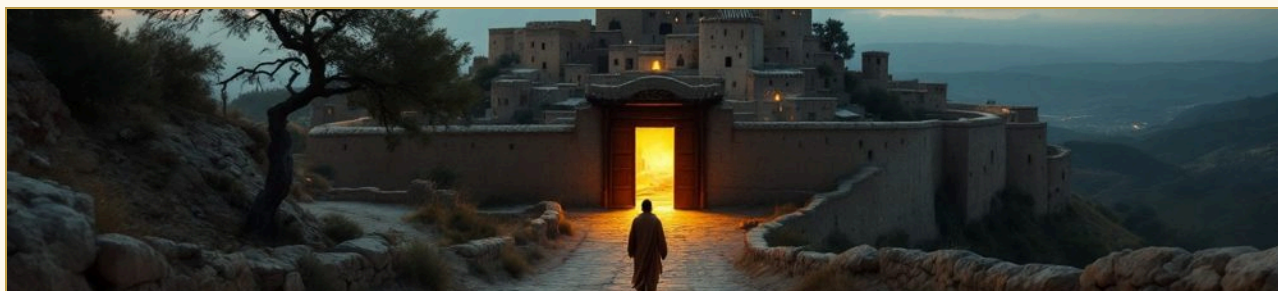
Reciprocity breeds only violence.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each of us keeps, without admitting it, a set of accounts: what I did for him, what he has not paid back. With whom are we still keeping that tally? And what lack — of consolation, of knowledge, of means — is someone near us suffering from?

SUBJECT 11

The refuge of one who did not mean it



PRESENTATION

The fourth acrostic is the most unexpected: it comes from the law of one who killed by accident. “But G-d caused it to happen by his hand” — and the Torah opens a place of refuge to him. The Rav finds in it a message for all the crises we did not choose.

THE QUESTION

What does Elul say to one who bears the weight of a harm he did not intend?

THE ANSWER

“Veha-Elokim inah le-yado, ve-samti lecha makom” (Shemot 21:13).

This concerns someone who killed inadvertently. The Holy One, blessed be He, gives him a possibility of refuge, of reconsidering the accident he caused without meaning to. For this accident gnaws at him: a man has died, and remorse gives him no respite.

So it is in every life: there are moments of crisis, situations that were not wanted, mistakes made. And the message is: I will help you rebuild yourself from there.

Even when we do not cause an accident ourselves, we are sometimes victims of other people's accidents, of their misconduct, of their irresponsibility. We did not want it: others drag us into their war, and it ends up costing us. It is on this point that the Rav breaks off his lecture, promising to return to it.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

I will help you rebuild yourself from there.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Is there someone among us who still carries an unintentional wrong, or the consequences of someone else's wrong? What “place of refuge” could we offer him — a word, a place, some time?