

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: Returning to One's Sources”: why the smallest of the letters
presides over the month of return, what the 974 drafts of the
world teach, and why honoring one's parents is engraved on the
first tablet. All the way to these thirty days in which, says the Rav,
we weep over our disconnection.



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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Nothing is uniform



PRESENTATION

The month of Elul opens on the day Moshe goes back up to receive the second Tablets, more accessible to the people. The Rav draws from this a first principle: the Torah is the minimum asked for the elevation of one's being — and beyond it, each person discovers other flavors in it.

THE QUESTION

If the Torah is the same for everyone, why does each person taste it differently — and why are no two days ever alike?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “Nothing is uniform.”

There are different degrees of elevation, even in interpreting the Torah, and depending on the interpretation one discovers other flavors, other essences. Just as there is a variety of plants, flowers, trees and minerals, there is a variety of flavors in the practice and perception of spiritual values.

For nothing is uniform: space is not, time is not, and man even less so. Successive days differ from one another. That is why the Hebrew calendar marks each Rosh Chodesh as the bridgehead of a new cycle.

Each month has its letter, which presided over its creation and gave it its stature, and each month is governed by the attributes of a tribe. Before drawing up the reckoning of Elul, then, we must know which month we are going through, and what face of time it presents to us.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

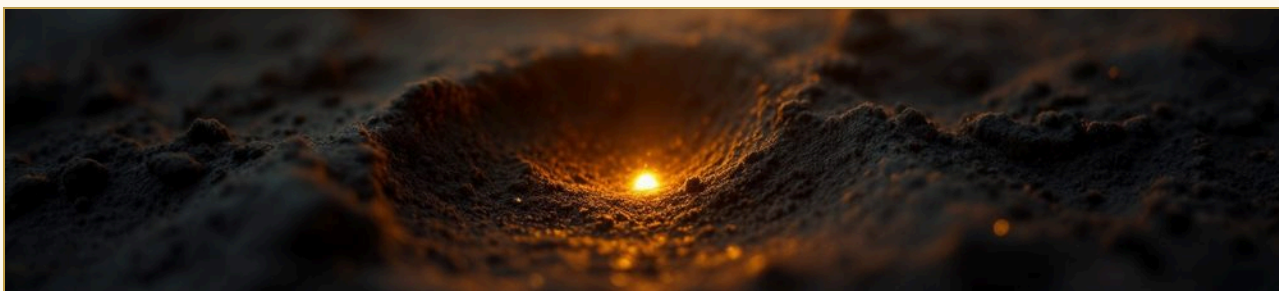
Successive days differ from one another.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In our home, each person lives the same tradition in his own way. What particular “flavor” does each person around the table find in it? And which day this week was like no other?

SUBJECT 02

The yud, the smallest of the letters



PRESENTATION

Each month is governed by a letter. Elul's is the yud: the smallest in the alphabet, barely a dot. And yet, says the Rav, it is the basis of all the others.

THE QUESTION

Why is the month of turning back into oneself placed under the sign of the smallest of the letters?

THE ANSWER

The letter of the month of Elul: the yud.

The yud is the essence of all the letters. When one begins to draw a letter, one always begins with a yud: it is the dot. Then one draws out this dot to give it different shapes. It is elastic: all the letters derive from it.

It is no coincidence that we define ourselves by this yud: it is the yud of Yehudi, the yud of Yisrael. It is the yud of the original light, the luminous point at the origin of creation.

But as creation unfolded, it darkened this light: the universe became its screen, and matter is steeped in it. Seeing that we would lose it or underestimate it, the Holy One, blessed be He, hid it away in the hearts of the tzaddikim. He wanted this light to dwell in man.

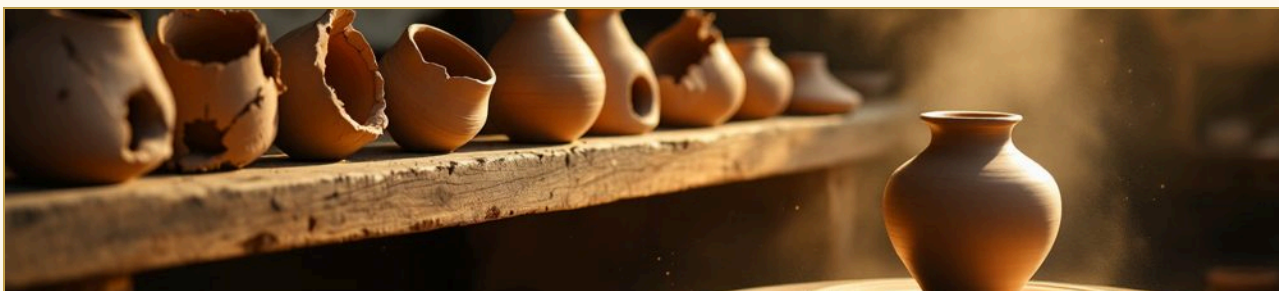
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We are the bearers of this yud.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What, in each of us, is the “small dot” from which everything else started — a value, a memory, a person? Do we still recognize it beneath all that has been added to it?

974 drafts before the world



PRESENTATION

Elul is the month of the creation of the universe: the world began on the 25th of Elul, to prepare for man's appearance on the first of Tishrei. But our Sages teach that 974 generations were created and then erased before it, because they did not answer to the original plan.

THE QUESTION

What does a world preceded by 974 drafts teach us — and why did teshuvah have to exist before it?

THE ANSWER

“Seven things were created before the world: the Torah, teshuvah...” (tractate Pesachim 54a).

There is always a guiding thought in carrying out a project: it is the Torah, which existed before the universe. And this project was realized out of 974 drafts, worlds created and then destroyed, because they could not answer to the original plan intended to serve all of humanity.

The fact is there: error, the very imperfection of a project, is written into the creation of the world. That is why our Sages teach that teshuvah preceded it: the possibility of restoring, of re-creating, of correcting. An error must not be allowed to demolish the project irreparably; it had to be possible to re-create the world, to re-create man, to allow him a new direction.

That is Elul: the analysis of the state of our universe and of ourselves within the plan of creation. Is there an original plan we should remain faithful to? It is up to us to find that first innocence again.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is up to us to find that first innocence again.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What did we “get wrong” this year that we would like to take up again, the way one reworks a draft? And the plan we had at the start for our family — do we still remember it?

A letter that conjugates in the future



PRESENTATION

In Hebrew, to move from past to future, one need only add a yud: shamar, he kept, becomes yishmor, he will keep. The Rav sees in this the very movement of Elul — and he connects it to the hand, and to a tribe of soldiers, Gad.

THE QUESTION

What does the yud of Elul make of our good resolutions: one more thought, or an act?

THE ANSWER

Shamar, yishmor; the yud and the yad, the hand; the tribe of Gad.

The yud is a projection toward the future. It does not allow one to stop for good: it marks a boundary before a new sentence, as before a new page of history. And it is inseparable from the yad, the hand, from action. It is not simply an abstract thought.

This yud is also that of the third person. In the relationship of ani and atah, of I and you, we remain very limited, in a subjective dialogue. Moving to the third person means being able to transcend the matter that limits us, and to let in a light from outside, a new energy.

Elul is linked to the tribe of Gad. They were valiant soldiers, able with a single stroke of the sword to cut off head and arm together, because they accepted no separation between thought and its realization. That is why the knot of the arm tefillin has the shape of a yud.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The yud is a projection toward the future.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Which of last year's decisions remained a “head without an arm”, a thought never carried out? Let each person choose a single resolution for the year and name the first concrete act that will put it into the future tense.

Two qualities of forgiveness



PRESENTATION

Wronging a friend is not the same as wronging a superior. The friend forgives; the superior sometimes does too — but he no longer entrusts us with anything. The Rav starts from this everyday experience to say what forgiveness we ask for in Elul.

THE QUESTION

Is being forgiven enough, if we are no longer trusted?

THE ANSWER

“Yashuv yerachamenu” — He will again have mercy on us (Michah 7:19).

There is a lower-quality forgiveness: you have been forgiven, fine, but I no longer entrust you with anything, I no longer count on you, you have lost my trust. One remains forgiven, but disqualified, halted in one's advancement.

And there is the other: you have committed a grave wrong, I forgive you, but I do not disqualify you; I still give you the chance to prove yourself further. That is the teshuvah we truly aspire to: an additional mercy that allows us to move forward.

The leitmotif of the Days of Awe says it: teshuvah, tefillah and tzedakah avert the severity of the decree. And the Rav points out that “awe” here must be understood rightly: there is a notion of reverent fear in it, not something to be afraid of.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

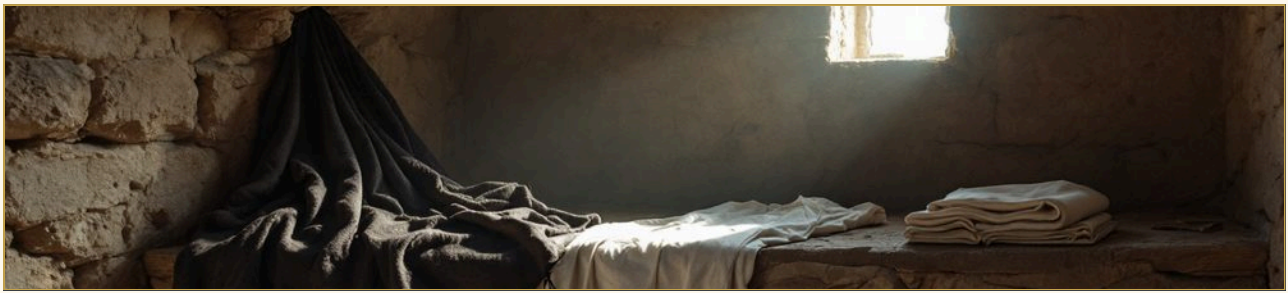
I forgive you, but I do not disqualify you.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Is there someone in our home whom we have “forgiven” without ever trusting again? What would it take to give him, this year, a real chance to prove himself?

SUBJECT 06

Taking off the cloak



PRESENTATION

Our Sages found the name Elul in the initials of three verses, which correspond to teshuvah, tefillah and tzedakah. For the Rav, these are three levels of return: to oneself, to the Creator, to one's fellow. And the first is not the easiest.

THE QUESTION

How can we return to ourselves when everything around us tells us who we should be?

THE ANSWER

Teshuvah, tefillah, tzedakah: three verses whose initials form the name Elul.

We are all conditioned: the culture of the times, the ideas of the times, the fashions in dress, the daily routine. And even if we wanted to break away from it, it is impossible: social pressure is such that one does not want to condemn oneself to total abstinence, to isolation, to loneliness.

Yet if I look deep within myself, there is a breath there that I share with my Creator, a part of His essence. How can I free it if I do not learn, from time to time, to strip it of all its wrappings, of this whole cloak of hypocrisy?

Turning back into oneself is therefore first a return to what characterizes me. I am not the other. Every creation is singular, and I am charged with a mission that is not the other's: I am not asked for his abilities, but to carry out the work that is on my scale.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

I am charged with a mission that is not the same as the other's.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What habit did we pick up this year only because "everyone does it"? Let each person name one wrapping he would like to take off before Rosh Hashanah.

Spirituality works like a mirror



PRESENTATION

The second verse is the best known: “Ani ledodi vedodi li”, I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine. The third comes from the Megillah: “each man to his fellow, and gifts to the poor.” The Rav reads them together: prayer and one's fellow run along the same thread.

THE QUESTION

Why do our requests to the Creator depend on the way we treat our fellow?

THE ANSWER

“Ani ledodi vedodi li” (Shir HaShirim 6:3); “ish lere’ehu umatanot la’evyonim” (Esther 9:22).

“I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine”: the Creator sends back to me the image I myself give Him, in equal proportion. Everything depends on my investment. And all our errors betray a lack of trust, a lack of faith: it is prayer that restores contact with the very word of creation.

As for my fellow, I am never a whole being. Just as the Holy One, blessed be He, hid a particle of His light in every being, He hid a part of me in my fellow. There is a particle of me in my wife: she is different, entirely different, but she carries the share of light that we share.

So if I do not behave toward my fellow as I ask the Creator to behave toward me, what are my requests worth? It is the same network; it is the same connection.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is the same network; it is the same connection.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What we will ask for on Rosh Hashanah — patience, forgiveness, generosity — do we grant it to those who live with us? Let each person choose one request from his prayer and practice it this week toward someone at home.

“If I am a father, where is My honor?”



PRESENTATION

To the twelve minor prophets correspond, according to some, the twelve months. The last month, Elul, is that of Malachi, the last of the prophets. With him, prophecy becomes an open-hearted dialogue with a people that has reached a certain maturity.

THE QUESTION

Why does the last prophet speak to the people in terms of father and children — and what does Eliyahu come to repair?

THE ANSWER

“If I am a father, where is My honor? If I am a master, where is My fear?” (Malachi 1:6).

Malachi begins by saying: I have always considered you My own children, and you should give Me the honor due to a father. If I am the Father, where is My honor? And if you consider Me Master, where is the fear I should inspire?

It is also he who, at the end, announces the sending of Eliyahu the prophet, who will turn the heart of the fathers to the children and the heart of the children to their fathers: he will restore communication between fathers and children. It is the relationship par excellence, the platform for everything else.

The Rav opens a parenthesis: we always speak of the merit of the fathers, zechut avot, never of that of the mothers. It is because one can be a father only through the mother: without the mother, there is no attribute of father. When we say zechut avot, it is a whole.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

One can be a father only through the mother.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Between parents and children, in our home, where has communication broken down? Let each person say one thing he has never said to his father, his mother or his child — something one need not wait for Eliyahu to say.

Why parents on the first tablet?



PRESENTATION

The Ten Commandments are engraved on two tablets. On the first, the divine Name appears in each commandment; on the second, it is absent. Yet “Honor your father and your mother” appears on the first, among the commandments between man and G-d.

THE QUESTION

Respect for parents is practiced by all humanity; what makes it a mitzvah between man and G-d?

THE ANSWER

“Honor your father and your mother” (Shemot 20:12) — on the first tablet.

There are three partners in every person: the father, the mother and the Shechinah. That is why it is said that, in a couple, one plus one do not make two: there is an additional presence in this union.

On the social level, who does not practice respect for parents? The whole world practices it; even the most immoral love their parents, each in his own way. It is in nature: we are a part of them; they placed something in us and invested in us. At the very least, a little gratitude is due.

The difference lies elsewhere. Respecting one's parents out of affection or gratitude remains within the limits of reason. Respecting them because one respects in them the Shechinah that allowed them to give life goes beyond all rationality. And it is the axis on which all the other commandments turn.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Only the perverse borrow without ever repaying.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What have we received from our parents that we have never “repaid”? And what changes, concretely, when we honor in them not only parents, but the Presence that made them partners?

SUBJECT 10

Thirty days to weep for one's father and mother



PRESENTATION

The Torah grants the captive woman a month to weep for her father and mother before beginning a new life. Thirty days: for the Rav, these are the thirty days of Elul.

THE QUESTION

What are we weeping for during this month, if our parents are alive?

THE ANSWER

“She shall weep for her father and her mother a full month” (Devarim 21:13).

It is said that a man will leave his father and his mother and cleave to his wife. This “leaving”, says the Rav, is not abandoning: it is rather supporting, proving oneself worthy of one's father and mother. But if this bond is broken, the soul must weep for its father and mother thirty days. Thirty days is the month of Elul: we are weeping over our disconnection.

The father has his father, who has his father, and so on back to Avraham, father of a multitude of nations, who recognizes the Master of the world as father. This bond is not self-evident: we do not think every day of going back, through our parents, to the great-grandparents we never knew.

Yet that is what return is: finding one's sources again, one's parents, one's great-grandparents, going back to the Avot. That is why we invoke the G-d of Avraham, of Yitzchak and of Yaakov: we recognize ourselves as their children. If this lineage is properly restored, we are on the right trajectory for the month.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We are weeping over our disconnection.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We can all name our parents, rarely their parents, almost never further back. Let each person go back tonight as far as he can and say the last name he knows. And what would we like our great-grandchildren to know about us?

SUBJECT 11

The heir who did not strike



PRESENTATION

At the end of the lecture, the Rav is asked: how are we to understand that Esav so respected his parents, when so many people today neglect theirs? He answers first that one cannot generalize, then tells a story from the Talmud.

THE QUESTION

How do we recognize the true child of his parents?

THE ANSWER

The story of Rabbi Bena'ah (tractate Bava Batra 58a).

One cannot generalize. Someone who places his parents in a retirement home and pays for a service out of his own money does so in his own way: he has lost a certain sensitivity, but he remains attentive to his parents. We cannot cast stones at him.

The Talmud tells that a man left his whole inheritance to just one of his children, without naming him. The rabbis consulted could not decide. Rabbi Bena'ah said to the sons: in your place, I would go and strike your father's grave until he rises and says which is the true son for whom he intends this property.

They all rushed to their father's grave, with hammers, with pickaxes, striking relentlessly. Only one did not dare to do it. He was the heir.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Only one did not dare to do it. He was the heir.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

To get what is due to us, are we sometimes ready to “strike the grave” — to wound someone's memory or honor? What would we never do, even to be proved right?

SUBJECT 12

Light: formed, not created



PRESENTATION

A listener asks the Rav what he means by “the light”, of which he has spoken throughout the lecture. He answers by going back to the first day of creation, and to a verse from the prophet.

THE QUESTION

What is this light we carry, and what can we do with it?

THE ANSWER

“Yotzer or u-vore choshech” — He forms light and creates darkness (Yeshayahu 45:7).

Light is G-d's first revelation: on the first day, He reveals His light through the darkness. The darkness is matter, the world He creates: it conceals. The light He did not create; He formed it: He gave it a form, a structure. The darkness, on the other hand, He created out of nothing.

This light is the divine light that dwells in each of us; one could say it is represented by the yud present in everyone. It is in the divine breath, in the creative word of which man is the trustee. And with it, man can take part in perfecting this world created in a raw state, to give it a human face.

That is why we inaugurate the month of Elul with the sound of the shofar, the divine breath. And what is this light made of? The Rav does not claim to know: the numerical value of or, light, is 207 — that of raz, mystery.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

He did not create light; He formed it.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Where did we see, this year, someone's light break through the “matter” — his fatigue, his worries, his temperament? How can we help him, this month, to shine more brightly?