

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

THE COUNTING OF THE OMER

12 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Festive Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture "Lag BaOmer: The Fires and the Light of the Zohar": why the greatest scholars perished through pride, how Rabbi Akiva went beyond Moshe, where the fires we kindle come from, and why the passing of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai is a celebration.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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Themes for reflection and questions to share around the table during the Counting of the Omer

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SUBJECT 01

No one comes out of exile unscathed



PRESENTATION

The days between Pesach and Shavuot serve to prepare the Jewish people to recover what it lost during the two hundred and ten years of slavery in Egypt. The Rav adds a remark that holds for every exile.

THE QUESTION

What do we bring back from an exile, even when we have survived it — and why are we still unable to unite on our own land?

THE ANSWER

No one comes out of an exile unscathed. One survives an exile, but one carries away many kelipot, many husks, many of the failings of the civilizations among which we lived.

That is why, even now that we find ourselves once again, with the help of Hashem, on our own land, we are still unable to break down the walls of our differences and recover the union of our essence, through our values and our land.

And that was precisely the message of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai to the exiles to come. This is why this period is a time of mourning — no festivities, no music, no weddings — until the truce of the thirty-third day.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

One survives an exile, but one carries away many kelipot, many husks, many of the failings of those civilizations.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each of us carries “husks” that came from elsewhere: from school, from work, from the country we grew up in. Which of them separates us most from the other members of our family or our community?

SUBJECT 02

A thousand funerals a day, among the greatest



PRESENTATION

Twenty-four thousand disciples of Rabbi Akiva die between Pesach and the thirty-third day of the Omer. These are not ignorant men: they are steeped in Torah. And their death coincides with the revolt of Bar Kochba against Rome, which Rabbi Akiva supported.

THE QUESTION

What failing of the most learned can cost more than the ignorance of simple folk?

THE ANSWER

They died because they did not treat one another with respect. Each thought himself a greater rav than the other and, imposing his authority, refused to listen. Note well: the problem does not lie with ordinary people; on the contrary, it afflicts great minds.

And this was all the stronger because it had been taught, at a certain point, that one should not mix with the common people, for one would lose some of one's substance. Picture the talmid chacham keeping his distance when he speaks to the man in the street.

These twenty-four thousand students took part in the fight alongside Bar Kochba to free the land from Roman rule, but they did not succeed.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

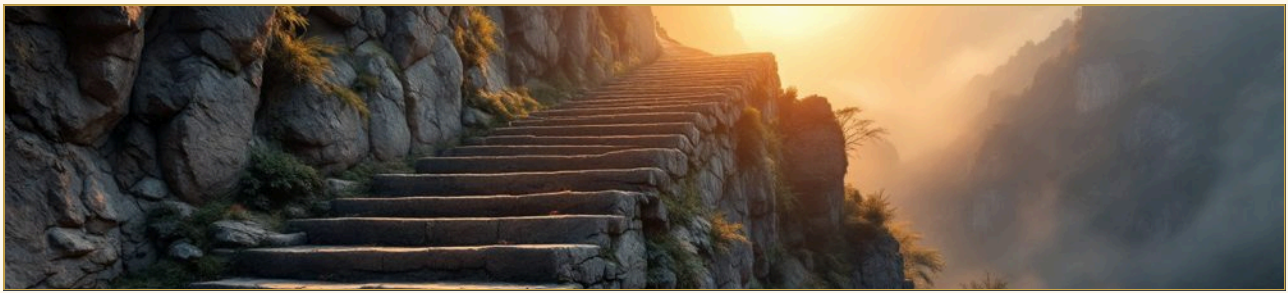
This pride is intolerable. This pride was the undoing of the twenty-four thousand students.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The more we know, the more we risk speaking “from afar”. Whom do we keep at a distance in the name of what we know? Let each one name a simple person from whom he has learned something.

SUBJECT 03

The fiftieth degree



PRESENTATION

It has been said that Rabbi Akiva attained the fifty degrees of understanding, a level that Moshe himself did not reach; he stopped at the forty-ninth. And we too count only forty-nine days.

THE QUESTION

How could Rabbi Akiva reach a degree that Moshe did not reach?

THE ANSWER

“You shall love the stranger” (Devarim 10:19).

In Egypt, the people had sunk almost to the last degree of impurity, of conditioning; only one remained. G-d tore them out of it at the last moment, and gave them, day after day, the possibility of rebuilding that dimension of man capable of receiving the flames of the Torah. That is why we count forty-nine days: the task is to recover the dimension of man in his middot.

Rabbi Akiva, for his part, reached the fiftieth degree because he descended from converts. This degree of the ger, for whose sake the Torah tells us to love the stranger, brings an element that the whole is missing: the element that completes man.

The convert does not receive his Judaism by birth; he chooses it. And that choice opens a door that birth alone does not provide.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

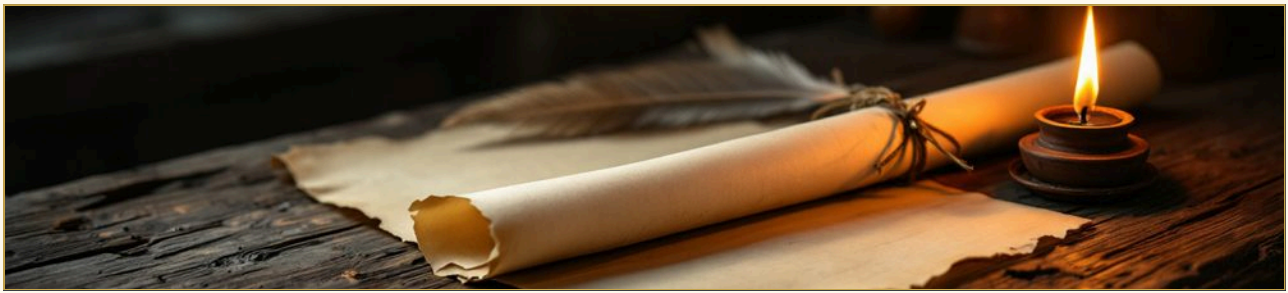
He brings an element that the whole is missing.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What we have chosen, we carry differently from what we have received. What has each of us chosen for himself in his Judaism? And what do those who came from elsewhere bring us?

SUBJECT 04

The crowns on the letters



PRESENTATION

The Talmud relates that Moshe, having gone up to the heavenly sphere, finds G-d tying crowns to the letters of the Torah. “What are You doing?” A man will come, He answers, who will derive heaps of laws from each crown: Akiva ben Yosef.

THE QUESTION

Why was the Torah not given to Rabbi Akiva rather than to Moshe?

THE ANSWER

The tagin, the crowns of the letters (Menachot 29b).

Moshe suggests: then give him Your Torah, why me? The answer: first, the time is not right. Then, you hold the Written Law. No one disputes the Written Law; there is only the way of reading it.

The Oral Law, however, opens many doors, because it is the Torah in the measure of each human perception. There is thus an evolution in the interpretation of the Oral Law, which only Rabbi Akiva could provide.

His life was modeled on Moshe's: forty years a man of the street, an am ha'aretz by choice — so as not to be disappointed by the conduct of the yeshiva students and not to have to judge them — forty years of study, then forty years of teaching twenty-four thousand disciples.

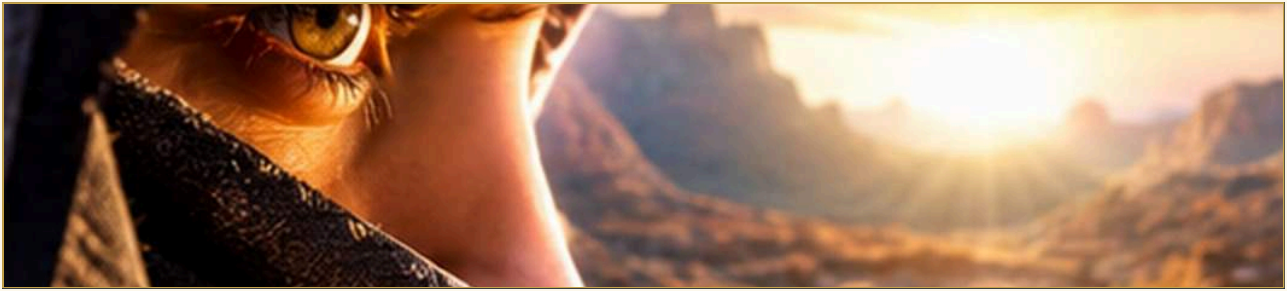
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The Oral Law is the Torah in the measure of each human perception.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There are tiny details in the Torah that carry mountains. Which small detail of our family tradition actually contains much more than we think?

A celebration on the day of a death



PRESENTATION

Among the five disciples whom Rabbi Akiva went to seek out after the plague, one shines: Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. For the death of Moshe, for that of Aharon, we fast. For that of Rabbi Shimon, on the thirty-third day of the Omer, we hold a hillula, a wedding feast.

THE QUESTION

How can the passing of a master become a celebration, when that of the very greatest is a fast?

THE ANSWER

The Zohar: on the day he departed, a fire surrounded his whole person.

Rabbi Shimon, a student of Rabbi Akiva, inherited his erudition in the Oral Law — the whole Torah bears Rabbi Akiva's imprint. But he opened new horizons for the people through the teaching of the Zohar.

It is at the moment this master of mystical thought passes away that his whole teaching spreads and that his students are able to disseminate it. It had just been sealed by his passing; there could be no more readjustment. He had finished transmitting; he withdrew.

And the Zohar relates that on the day he departed, a fire surrounded his whole person.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

At the moment this master of the Zohar passes away, that is when his whole teaching spreads.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Sometimes a teaching spreads only once its author is gone. What have we received from a loved one who has passed away that we truly understand only now? And are we passing it on?

SUBJECT 06

The children's bow



PRESENTATION

Two symbols mark Lag BaOmer: the bonfires, and archery by young children. The Rav begins with the bow, which links this day to the revolt of Bar Kochba and to a verse of David.

THE QUESTION

What does the children's archery say, and why must we “learn to fight”?

THE ANSWER

“To teach the sons of Yehudah the bow” (Shmuel II 1:18).

The archery of young children says that Bar Kochba's fight is not over. Bar Kochba could not bear Rome's grip on the Land of Israel; he held that Israel had a right to its independence on its own territory, to run its life in keeping with its values, with its identity. And in this he was supported by Rabbi Akiva.

We must learn to shoot the bow, we must learn to fight. David said so when he lamented the death of Shaul and Yonatan: he taught the children of Yehudah the art of war, the art of archery.

The other symbol, the bonfires, points to another story: that of fire since the beginning.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What must our children learn to “fight” for today? Let each one name a just struggle he would like to pass on — and how to teach it without hatred.

The first fire of the Torah



PRESENTATION

Before speaking of Rabbi Shimon's fire, the Rav goes back to the origin of fire in the Torah: the Covenant between the Pieces. There the promised land is placed between the two great civilizations, Egypt to the south and the Euphrates to the north.

THE QUESTION

What is this first fire, and how did it pass through history without going out?

THE ANSWER

“Behold, a smoking furnace and a torch of fire that passed between these pieces” (Bereshit 15:17).

The land was promised to Avram's descendants through a pillar of fire. It is the first fire of the Torah: a furnace full of smoke, a torch of fire giving light. It is the fire that neither the waters of the Nile nor those of the Euphrates can flood and put out — the waters of every pogrom, of forced baptisms and conversions, of assimilation.

This fire almost went out once, in Egypt. The Holy One, blessed be He, took it out of there and set it in the desert, until the moment when Moshe finds it again in the burning bush and carries it within him.

It is this fire that accompanies the freed slaves across the desert and brings them to the foot of Sinai, where they find it again in another form.

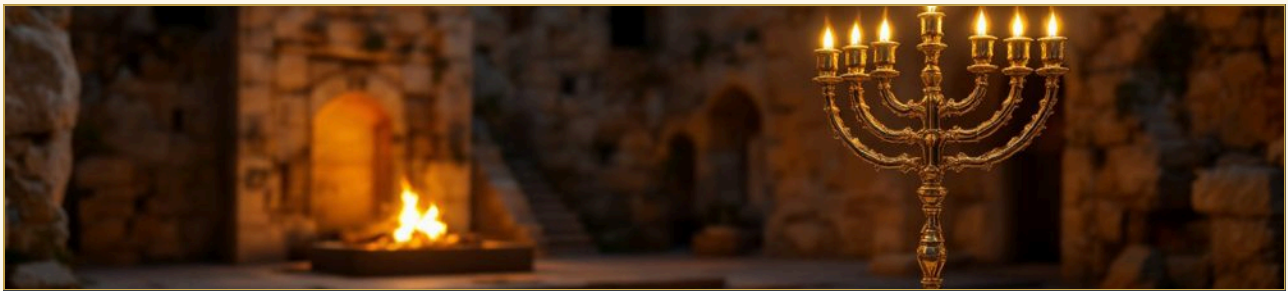
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is the fire that neither the waters of the Nile can flood and put out, nor the waters of the Euphrates.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What “waters” have threatened to put out our family's fire over the generations? Let each one tell how that fire was saved, and by whom.

Two fires in the Sanctuary



PRESENTATION

There are thus two fires: that of the promise of the Land of Israel, and that of the covenant at Sinai between the Holy One, blessed be He, and Israel. These two fires will later find their place in the Sanctuary.

THE QUESTION

Where do these two fires burn in the Temple, and which of them was misunderstood by Rabbi Akiva's disciples?

THE ANSWER

The perpetual fire of the altar; the ner maaravi, the western lamp of the Menorah.

The fire burns on the altar and it will never go out: it is the fire of the land, the one that atones for the land and for the sins of the people. And there are the lights of the Menorah, among them the ner maaravi, the western lamp, which always burned, which never went out, and from which all the others were lit: it is the lamp of the Torah, turned toward the Holy of Holies.

The fire of the Land of Israel, that of Bar Kochba's fight for its liberation. The fire of the Torah, poorly absorbed by Rabbi Akiva's disciples, each of whom regarded it as his exclusive property.

And the fire of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the Zohar: the fire of transparency, the one that unites through love all the elements of the people of Israel.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The fire of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the Zohar, the fire of transparency, the one that unites through love all the elements of the people of Israel.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The fire of the Torah can give light or burn, depending on whether we share it or take possession of it. In our discussions, do our convictions warm others or burn them?

The secret is the assembly



PRESENTATION

When the Torah is reduced to the demands of pure reason, says the Rav, it is a lost cause. There are four levels of interpretation, like the four rivers that flowed out of the Garden of Eden: peshat, remez, derash and sod. The last, sod, the secret, receives an unexpected definition from him.

THE QUESTION

What is sod, the secret of the Torah — and why is it never “my” Torah?

THE ANSWER

“Into their council (sod) let my soul not enter; to their assembly (kahal) let my honor not be joined” (Bereshit 49:6).

Peshat is the literal meaning, pure reality, to which one clings. Then derash, the allegory, and remez, the allusion to that neshamah which governs everything without showing itself. And finally sod.

In Yaakov's blessing, sod is set in parallel with kahal, the assembly. Sod is the sum, the gathering together. Chop the teaching into slices, cut it up, separate it: then it remains your Torah, each one speaks his own Torah as he conceives it, as he understands it.

But beware: that is not Torat Hashem, of which we sing “Torat Hashem temimah”, the Torah of the L-rd is perfect. G-d's Torah is not my Torah according to my levels of interpretation: it is the one that stands beyond them and is able to gather all the currents together, to unite them.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Torat Hashem is the one that stands beyond, and is able to gather all the currents together, to unite them.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

When we discuss Torah or values, are we defending “our” Torah, or seeking the one that gathers together? Let each one say what he learned this year from someone who thinks differently.

SUBJECT 10

Leaving the cave, he burns people with his gaze



PRESENTATION

A listener objects: wasn't Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai an extremist? After twelve years of study in a cave, he comes out and sees men working the land. He looks at them so harshly that they are burned. A heavenly voice sends him back to his cave.

THE QUESTION

What had he missed, after twelve years of study, to be told that he had learned nothing?

THE ANSWER

The story of the cave (Shabbat 33b).

The voice tells him: if that is all you have learned by devoting yourself to study for twelve years — to condemn others — then you have learned nothing. He goes back and stays one more year. When he comes out again, he sees a man carrying myrtle branches to honor Shabbat, and he understands that all this work is for the sake of entering Shabbat.

Why had he condemned them? Because at the time it was an economy that served only the Roman occupier: when the Romans profit from all the labor of the Jewish people and from its love for its land, better to strengthen oneself in study. But the Rav does not think he excluded working the land, which marks the deep bond between the Torah and Eretz Israel.

For there is no Torah like the Torah of the Land of Israel. Outside the land, it is adjusted to what people will say; it is muzzled so as not to disturb others.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

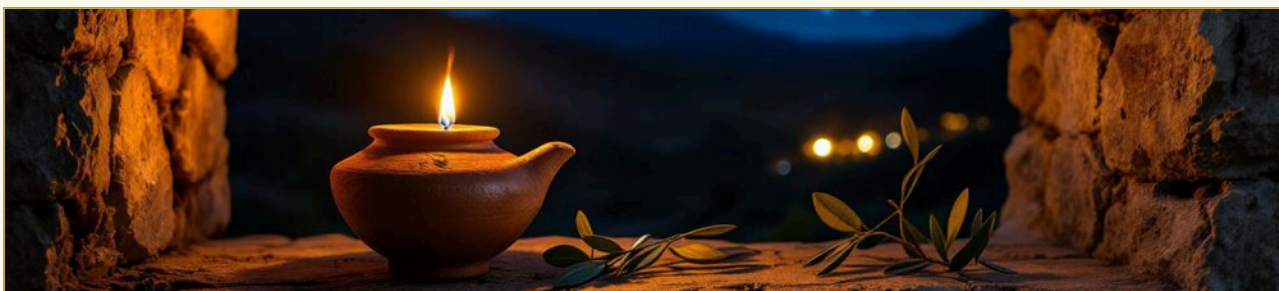
If that is all you have learned by devoting yourself to the study of Torah for twelve years, to condemn others, then you have learned nothing.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The more we know, the harsher our gaze can become. Let each one say whom he has looked down on this year without knowing anything of his life. And what, in other people's work, "prepares Shabbat" without our seeing it?

SUBJECT 11

The flame at the head of the departed



PRESENTATION

There were two trees in the Garden of Eden. The tree of knowledge still distinguished between good and evil; in the tree of life there is no good and evil. The Rav draws from this a reading of mourning — and of the ner that we light for one who has died.

THE QUESTION

Why can we not yet bless “He Who is good and does good” when we lose a loved one — and what does the flame we light say?

THE ANSWER

“Baruch Dayan ha’emet” — blessed be the true Judge.

In the tree of life, even evil takes part in the fulfilment of man in his entirety: when it is well managed, when it submits to a higher will, it can become good. It happens that events we lament turn out afterward to have served to move to another level of understanding, and to have been an element of good.

But today, when we lose a loved one, we cannot yet say “blessed be He Who is good and does good”. We say “blessed be the true Judge”, because we are not able to understand that, in this loss, we are going to begin to live by a light that we kindle.

That is why, as soon as the soul departs from a loved one, a flame is placed at his head. Every being, in life, carries this flame. The whole question is whether we will give it more substance so that it lasts — and then it becomes a perpetual light — or whether it will remain a flickering light that the slightest wind may put out.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Every being in life carries this flame. The whole question is whether we will give it more substance so that it lasts.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Let each one name something he does today that he received from someone who has passed away. That flame — are we feeding it, or waiting for it to last on its own?

SUBJECT 12

Mercy rather than judgment



PRESENTATION

Rabbi Akiva's Torah, great as it was, could devastate twenty-four thousand students, because each one confined himself to his own exclusive teaching. Rabbi Shimon comes to illuminate the people with a new light. And yet it was Rabbi Akiva who had called the Song of Songs “the holy of holies”.

THE QUESTION

What does Rabbi Shimon bring that Rabbi Akiva's Torah had not yet given — and why only in that era?

THE ANSWER

“Many waters cannot quench love” (Shir HaShirim 8:7).

Rabbi Shimon teaches that we can, b'rachamim, through mercy, through love, spare the world from judgment — and judgment is always the source of much harm. If we knew how to open the horizons of the Torah under the sign of mercy and love, we would find again that Shir HaShirim, the hymn to love, which Rabbi Akiva declared kodesh kodashim.

Why only in that era? Because the Torah of the Zohar carries a will for hitchadshut, for constant renewal. Halachah is fixed, it no longer moves; sod allows the data to be renewed, just as the Creator renews His creation every day.

The sage is greater than the prophet, but he is limited, for he addresses reason. Rational thought and prophetic thought must be blended together: only in this way can the Torah be perceived, lived and, day by day, discovered.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We can, with mercy, with love, spare the world from judgment, and judgment is always the source of much harm.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In our family, who judges and who shows mercy? Let each one name a situation in which, this week, he would like to replace a judgment with a gesture of love.