

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

THE COUNTING OF THE OMER

11 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Festive Table

Eleven questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture "The Month of the Omer: Counting in Order to Count Oneself": what we really count for forty-nine days, why a covenant is "cut", what a person's face is worth, and why the truce falls on the day after the heart.



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

A covenant of the land that depends on the Omer



PRESENTATION

Between Pesach and the thirty-third day of the Omer, twenty-four thousand disciples of Rabbi Akiva died: nearly a thousand funerals a day. The Rav starts from this catastrophe, and from a Midrash that asks us not to neglect the mitzvah of the Omer, for the promise of the land depends on it.

THE QUESTION

What did Rabbi Akiva's disciples lack — and why does the promise of the land depend on the count?

THE ANSWER

The Midrash: do not neglect the mitzvah of the Omer, for the covenant of the land depends on it.

They did not recognize one another. It is not a matter of lacking love for one's fellow, but of failing to recognize the human dignity of each person: they did not seek to accept difference, diversity, nuance in the stream of thought each one chooses — provided it flows from the source and returns to the source.

The problem is not foreign to our own day. Rabbi Akiva had to go and find five disciples in the south of the country, through whom he renewed the heritage of the Torah we hold in our hands.

That is why the mitzvah of the Omer must not be neglected: the covenant of the promise of the land depends on it. One cannot inherit a country without having learned to recognize the other.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

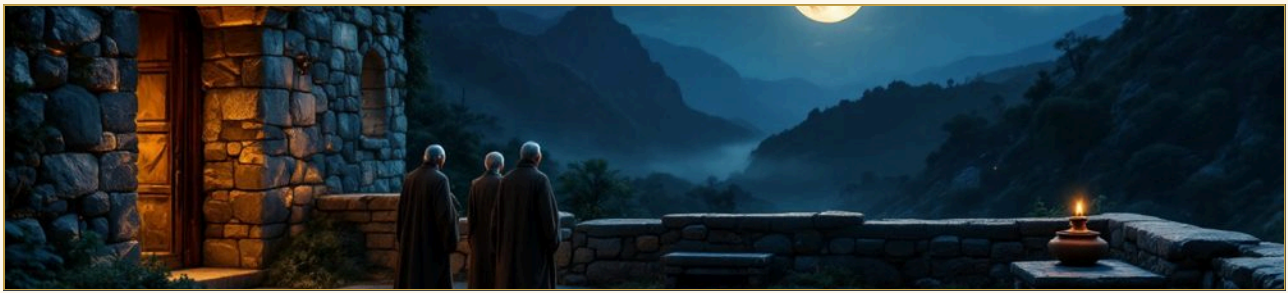
The covenant of the promise of the land depends on it.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Is loving someone the same as recognizing his dignity? Let each person say whose opinion he “tolerates” without truly recognizing it — and what would change if he did.

SUBJECT 02

A time we conceive ourselves



PRESENTATION

During the Omer we count both the days and the weeks. But which days? The Rav answers: not the days of creation, but those of the forming of the Jewish people. And he gives a surprising proof, taken from the calendar.

THE QUESTION

If even Rosh Hashanah can be postponed by a court, to whom does the time we count belong?

THE ANSWER

We count the days and weeks of the forming of the Jewish people and of its march toward the land of Israel. For the purpose of the exodus from Egypt is the covenant at Sinai, then the arrival in the land of Israel, to celebrate Pesach there and bring the Omer.

That time is not the time of creation: it is a time we have conceived. Imagine: Rosh Hashanah, the anniversary of creation, is pushed back a month in a leap year. The day of judgment, the day of reckoning, is delayed, because the court decided to balance the solar and lunar years and created a thirteen-month year.

This time is the one G-d asked us to count for ourselves, for our festivals, for our events. Even the giving of the Torah depends on this awareness of the time we have taken charge of, day after day.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is we who determine time, from our events, from our history.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Do we undergo our time, or do we take charge of it? Let each person say which “day” of his week he himself devoted to something that truly counts.

SUBJECT 03

The day the manna stopped



PRESENTATION

The Omer is a measure: that of the manna that came down every day in the desert for forty years. Then comes the first harvest in the land of Israel, and the manna stops. On that day, the Torah asks us to bring a measure of barley from the first harvest before benefiting from our own labor.

THE QUESTION

Why, on the very day a person begins to eat from his labor, must he first bring a measure of grain to the Sanctuary?

THE ANSWER

“Man does not live by bread alone, but by all that comes from the mouth of the L-rd” (Devarim 8:3).

Man begins to feed himself from the fruit of his toil and the produce of his own land. But in between, he has brought the Omer: a measure of barley, the first harvest reaped on the day after Pesach. This offering made the link between the manna, heavenly food, and the product of man's labor, earthly food. And it is the meeting of these two foods that sustains life.

It is not only material bread that nourishes man: the divine word nourishes him too. If we want our food to benefit us fully, it must have its spiritual dimension; it must find its way back to its source.

Indeed, the first instruction given to man in the Garden of Eden was to eat of the fruits, and generously: so as to maintain the indispensable relationship between the concrete, the material and the spiritual.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is the meeting of these two foods, heavenly and earthly, that truly sustains life.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Of what we are eating tonight, what part is the fruit of our labor, and what part is a gift? Let each person say what he received this year without having earned it.

Seven times seven



PRESENTATION

When we count the Omer, we count the day we are on and, at the same time, the week it belongs to. Forty-nine days: seven times seven. The Rav notes that the word middah, measure, quality, has precisely the numerical value of forty-nine.

THE QUESTION

Why count by sevens, and what are these seven “middot” we should make our own?

THE ANSWER

Middah: mem 40, dalet 4, heh 5 — forty-nine.

Each day contains a structure of seven that gathers in miniature all the elements of creation, while bringing out the particularity of that day. These seven days each have their own specific character, and in the same way man has his middot, his measures.

There are seven middot that govern the world. These virtues, these sefirot, are the ones that govern our life and the ones that govern the world, and we must make them our own so as to recover through them the dimension of Adam.

It is a structure of new creation: in forty-nine days, man remakes his own measure.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

There are seven middot that govern the world; they are the ones that govern our life, the ones that govern the world.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Kindness, strictness, harmony, perseverance... Which of our qualities is out of proportion, which too weak? Let each person choose one middah to work on this week.

SUBJECT 05

The great Adam and the small Adam



PRESENTATION

The Torah speaks of the “navel of the earth”, the “eyes of the earth”, the “mouth of the earth”, the “wings of the earth.” It lends the universe the features of a human being. The Rav draws from this a very concrete consequence for the way we eat.

THE QUESTION

If the universe is a great Adam, how can man make it insignificant — and what difference does a blessing make?

THE ANSWER

Our Sages: whoever eats without blessing eats “like a dog.”

The Torah calls the created universe Adam gadol, the great Adam, and we are the small Adam: it is our personality that makes the personality of the universe we live in. It ascribes to the earth the image of man's personality.

So when man becomes insignificant, how does he become so? First of all in the way he feeds himself from the produce of the earth.

When there is no blessing, our Sages say he eats like a dog: he regards this food as prey, the way an animal finds its prey and seeks to satisfy its instinct. That is why a berachah is needed.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

He regards this food simply as prey.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Do we eat, or devour? Let each person suggest a way to slow down, to bless or to give thanks before the meal, so that the table is not merely a place for seizing prey.

We do not count days, we count the Omer



PRESENTATION

The blessing we recite each evening does not say “the counting of the days of the Omer”: it says “sefirat ha-omer”, the counting of the Omer. Yet the Omer is not counted: it is a measure, the ration of manna that came down each day in the desert.

THE QUESTION

If it is the days we are counting, why does the blessing name a measure of food?

THE ANSWER

“Al sefirat ha-omer”; sefirah, from the same root as sapir, sapphire.

We should have said the counting of the days of the Omer. No: it is not time that we count. Sefirat ha-omer is what gives value to this measure, which was the food ration of each member of the community of Israel during the forty years in the desert.

Sefirah comes from sapir, sapphire: it means purifying its form, restoring the object's transparency. Restoring food's transparency, connecting it back to the source it flows from.

To count the Omer, then, is to count what one has received until one sees through it where it comes from.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is restoring the object's transparency, food's transparency, connecting it back to the source it flows from.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We measure our weeks in appointments and deadlines, never in what we have received. Let each person say what he would count if he had to count his “rations” rather than his days.

SUBJECT 07

Yesh and al: the head decides



PRESENTATION

Omer (ayin 70, mem 40, resh 200) adds up to three hundred and ten, like the word yesh. Yesh has no equivalent in other languages: it is not a verb; it is the act of giving reality to something. And the Rav reads this word hidden in the very name of Israel.

THE QUESTION

What makes a person tip toward being or toward nothingness — and why is humiliating someone so serious?

THE ANSWER

Yisrael: yesh (being), al (nothingness), and in the middle the resh, the head.

In Yisrael there is yesh, reality, and at the end al, negation. There is no middle ground: either being or nothingness. What will decide the side? The resh in the middle. Everything depends on whether it is rosh, the head, on the side of royalty, or rash, the pauper, pettiness — and then it is decline.

This resh is the panim, the face. There are two realities in a person: his physical reality, and his face, which reflects his inner self.

That is why we must take care not to show contempt, not to humiliate our fellow in public: his face reddens, turns pale, and that is equivalent to a crime. Our Sages say it is better to throw oneself into a furnace than to compromise one's fellow's life in this way.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is better to throw oneself into a furnace than to compromise one's fellow's life.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Have we made someone blush or go pale in front of others, even in jest? How can we make amends? And which face in our family do we need to look at more closely?

Why do we “cut” a covenant?



PRESENTATION

In Hebrew, one does not conclude a covenant: one cuts it, *karot brit*. The verb is that of cutting. And the Midrash ties the promise of the land precisely to the first covenant, that of circumcision.

THE QUESTION

Why is a covenant, which ought to bind, expressed with a verb that separates?

THE ANSWER

The expression “karot brit”, to cut a covenant.

We should have said to conclude a covenant, to bind. No: because we are condemned to be separate from one another, even in our love. But each has cut himself off from a part of himself and entrusted it to the other, and the other has done the same; so that wherever we are, we carry with us each other's part.

That is why the first covenant is that of the Milah: it means cutting, in the very organ of one's own reproduction, and leaving a part of oneself. We reproduce like all creatures, but not in the same way — and on that way depends the way we manage the land.

One may leave Egypt and set out on this march toward the land: if one has not agreed to cut something away from oneself, to leave room for the other, one has done absolutely nothing.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

If one has not agreed to cut something away from oneself, to leave room for the other, one has done absolutely nothing. Everything must begin again.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Let each person say what he has really cut away from himself for those who live with him. To whom have we entrusted a part of ourselves — and did he even know it?

What it cost Aharon to rejoice



PRESENTATION

The book of Bereshit is made up almost entirely of quarrels between brothers. And then comes Aharon, the elder, who is told that the mission goes to his younger brother. He did nothing heroic: he rejoiced.

THE QUESTION

What is so rare about an elder brother's joy at his younger brother's promotion, that the priesthood should be given to him forever?

THE ANSWER

“He will see you and rejoice in his heart” (Shemot 4:14); the covenant of priesthood granted to Pinchas.

Within one and the same family, here is Aharon, the older brother, rejoicing at the promotion of his younger brother and the mission entrusted to him by the Holy One, blessed be He. The first brother to rejoice at the other's success is he. That is why he was raised to the title of Kohen, with an eternal covenant for himself and his descendants.

A second shared in this title: Pinchas. He saw the decadence, he could not bear it, he intervened to stop the plague, and he too is promised the kehunah.

And we ourselves are destined to be a kingdom of Kohanim, entrusted with a mission to the other peoples. Our own recognition is therefore measured by the way we recognize others.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The first brother to rejoice at the other's success was Aharon.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

It is easy to comfort someone close who fails; it is very hard to rejoice for someone who succeeds better than we do. Let each person name another's success he found it hard to applaud this year.

SUBJECT 10

The thirty-third day is the day after the heart



PRESENTATION

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai asks his disciples which path a person should cling to. One answers: a generous eye; another: a good friend; another: foreseeing what will be born. He prefers the answer of Elazar ben Arach: a good heart.

THE QUESTION

Why does a good heart include all the other qualities — and what remains to be traveled after the thirty-third day?

THE ANSWER

Pirkei Avot 2: “Lev tov”; lev is 32, tov is 17.

A good heart includes all the other qualities. When one has a good heart, one does not suffer from the other's success; one does not despise him, one is not busy analyzing his negative sides: one focuses on his good side. Lev is thirty-two: that is why the truce falls on the thirty-third day of the Omer.

And when we have reached this lev, what awaits us? Tov, which is seventeen: exactly the seventeen days separating the thirty-third day from Shavuot.

In the morning prayer we say “tov yatzar kavod li-shmo”: He created the good, glory to His Name. For G-d created the world to be recognized in His kavod, and self-respect goes together with respect for the other.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

When one has a lev tov, one does not suffer from the other's success.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We can speak well of someone and suffer inwardly from his success. Let each person say for whom he can rejoice effortlessly — and for whom he cannot.

SUBJECT 11

The first fruits of the land, the first fruits of the people



PRESENTATION

The path of the Omer takes us from the covenant of the Milah, in which one agrees to cut something away for one's fellow, to the Tablets of the covenant, and then to the land. The Rav concludes with what, at the end of the road, the wealth of the land means.

THE QUESTION

Why is the land of Israel not the fruit of conquest — and what does reshit, first fruits, mean?

THE ANSWER

Reshit: the first fruits of the soil, and Israel called “reshit tevuato”, the first fruits of His harvest (Yirmeyahu 2:3).

The wealth of the land is immediately tied to its heavenly source, since the land is G-d's gift to the people of Israel. It is not the object of a conquest, it is not the fruit of conquest: it is first and foremost the gift of G-d.

It is the gift of this embryo of creation, the land, to the people that is likewise an embryo of creation. That is why the first fruits of the soil go together with the first fruits of creation, and with the people of Israel, itself called first fruits.

All are connected to their point of origin. And when everything is connected to its source, then everything holds; everything is in perfect balance.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

When everything is connected to its point of origin, then everything holds; everything is in perfect balance. And that is the message of the Omer.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What we possess — did we conquer it or receive it? Let each person name a blessing in his life that he could “connect back to its source” through an act of gratitude.