

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

THE FAST DAYS

10 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Table

Ten questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture "Tisha BeAv: At the Root of the Destruction": the charter that binds the land and the law, the night the spies wept, and that banquet where no one said a word. The cause of the destruction, says the Rav, is to be sought within us — and exile is not a punishment, but a therapy.



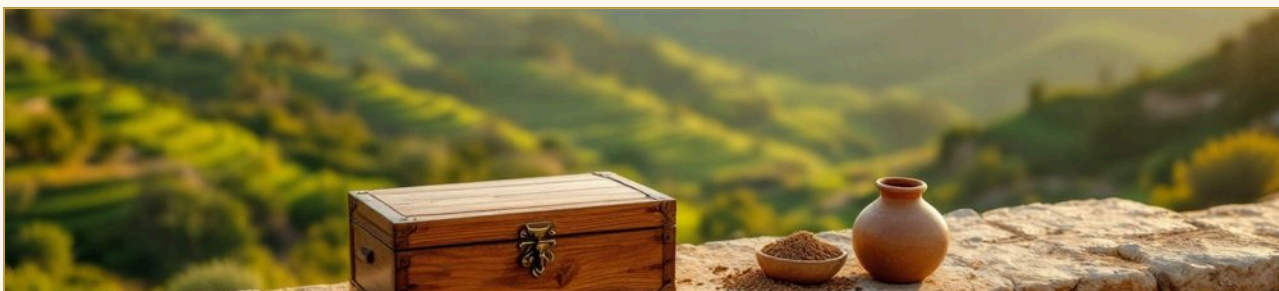
Rav Raphaël Benizri

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Themes for reflection and questions to share around the table on the fast days

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Twice “heritage”



PRESENTATION

The word *morashah*, heritage, appears only twice in the Torah: concerning the Torah and concerning the land. The Rav makes it the key to his whole lecture on the destruction.

THE QUESTION

Why are the land and the law bound by one and the same “charter” — and what bond unites the people with its land?

THE ANSWER

“The Torah that Moshe commanded us, a heritage of the congregation of Yaakov” (Devarim 33:4); “I will give it to you as a heritage” (Shemot 6:8).

G-d did not only reveal the law to us: in the same movement He disclosed to us its place of anchorage. The land and the law are intimately bound to one another by a charter.

Yet we were not born in Canaan. Our womb is in Egypt: that is where the people was born, and it is forbidden to return there — who longs to return to his mother’s womb? The Land of Israel is the place of flourishing. We did not conquer it, we were not born in it: it was given by G-d.

What unites us with it is a covenant, like that of husband and wife. That is why, at every wedding, we recall the joy of the barren woman who will see her children gathered within her: this refers to the Land of Israel.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The land and the law are intimately bound to one another by a charter.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

A heritage is received, but it must still be lived in. What have we received from our parents — a value, a place, a way of life — that we have not yet truly made our own? How can we bring it to life in our home?

The poison of love



PRESENTATION

The Torah warns: “When you have begotten children and grandchildren, and you have grown old in the land...” The Rav reads this verse as the warning addressed to every love.

THE QUESTION

Why is the danger that threatens the people's love for its land growing old — and what is the remedy?

THE ANSWER

“When you have begotten children and grandchildren, and you have grown old in the land...” (Devarim 4:25).

The bond of love that unites the people with its land is a real choice, and it carries a danger, like every love that is allowed to grow old. The poison of every love is aging and routine: one settles into the everyday and is no longer able to reinvigorate it, to give it a new dimension each time.

If the land ends up rejecting its inhabitants, because they no longer observe the moral foundations of conduct it requires, there is a therapy: exile.

There, despite every attempt at emancipation, the people found neither its place nor a welcoming home. It learned to rediscover its identity, turned back toward its sources and longed for the return. But this return, the Rav adds, must take place on the basis of a unity recovered around the fundamental rules of the law.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The poison of every love is aging and routine.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

A marriage, a family, a practice: every love can grow old. What did we do this year to give new dimension to what we love? Let each one propose an idea to refresh a habit of the house.

SUBJECT 03

The golden calf, the spies: two refusals



PRESENTATION

Two sins in the desert, twice forty days: Moshe's absence on the mountain, the expedition of the spies. The first was forgiven at once. The second cost forty years, and it is from it that the 9th of Av dates.

THE QUESTION

Why is the rejection of the Law forgiven on the spot, while the rejection of the Land is paid for with forty years of wandering?

THE ANSWER

“The whole congregation raised its voice, and the people wept that night” (Bamidbar 14:1); Ta'anit 29a.

The sin of the golden calf is a rejection of the Law; that of the spies, a rejection of the Land. The first was forgiven, but with a suspended sentence: on the day you do it again, I will remember this first infidelity. Infidelity to the Land, however, was not forgiven immediately: it took forty years to atone for it, and it was on the 9th of Av that, year after year, part of the desert generation died.

For the spies' argument was attractive: if we have a land, we will grow old like all the nations, and nothing will remain of us — France no longer recognizes itself in the Gauls. So let us stay without borders, in the desert of the nations, and live with them.

Kalev and Yehoshua stood firm: if the L-rd is pleased with us, He will bring us into this land. If this will of G-d is in us and drives us, we will succeed.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

You wept for nothing; you will be led to perpetuate this weeping every time you refuse to identify fully with the Land of Israel.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The spies preferred an ideal with no address to a land where one grows old. With us too: what do we keep postponing so as not to have to truly settle it — a commitment, a home, a decision? And what has that postponement already cost us?

A laboratory land



PRESENTATION

The desert generation, says the Rav, did not grasp the importance of the land as the place where the people's spiritual aspirations are fulfilled. But he immediately warns: this is not about nationalism.

THE QUESTION

If the land is not simply a national homeland, what is it?

THE ANSWER

“You shall spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south” (Bereshit 28:14).

One was not to be content with national borders: nationalism remains somewhat backward in the eyes of Jewish thought. These borders should be able to widen, to the west, the east, the north and the south, in the name of Israel's spirituality. That is what matters most.

And the laboratory of this spirituality is the Land of Israel, kept sheltered from foreign influences and interference, preserved in its original purity.

Kalev and Yehoshua, who stood up to the spies, represent two dynasties, says the Rav: that of David, and that of Mashiach son of Yosef, a sociocultural messianism destined to give way to the messianism of David.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Nationalism will remain somewhat backward in the eyes of Jewish thought.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

A home too can be a laboratory: a protected place where one tries to live what one believes. What does our home protect, and what does it radiate outward? How can we widen its borders without losing what gives it life?

When each current thinks itself vital



PRESENTATION

The sin of the spies comes right after the Mishkan was set up. The Rav recalls its four letters — king, judge, kohen, prophet — to raise another question: on what condition does the Divine Presence dwell in the midst of the people?

THE QUESTION

What makes the Sanctuary lose its reason for being?

THE ANSWER

“Happy is the man who always fears; but he who hardens his heart will fall into misfortune” (Mishlei 28:14; Gittin 55b).

The prophet is the guardian of the other three powers: he makes sure that no inner collusion brings about the downfall of one or another, and that a harmonious balance remains between king, judge and kohen. It is this balance that causes the Shechinah to dwell among the people. It returns with Shlomo, when peace reigns within the borders and the people forms a whole.

The Sanctuary loses its reason for being when each of these currents begins to regard itself as the most vital, the most essential, and wants to dominate or exclude the other.

That is where Rabbi Yochanan cites the verse from Proverbs. Happy is the man who always keeps a fear: the fear of error, a margin for error, a modicum of honesty and a little room for the other. He who hardens his heart will know a fall. And to what does this verse apply? To Kamtsa and Bar Kamtsa.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In a family, each one has his function: the one who organizes, the one who decides, the one who teaches, the one who inspires. Does it happen that one thinks himself more indispensable than the others? Let each one say what he appreciates in another's role.

Kamtsa and Bar Kamtsa: the hand that closes



PRESENTATION

A man gives a banquet. His servant makes a mistake and brings his master's enemy. The master demands that he leave. The finest people of the land are there, the masters of the Law too — and no one says a word.

THE QUESTION

Two assumed names, Kamtsa and Bar Kamtsa. What does the name tell us, and why does the fault fall on the silent guests more than on the host?

THE ANSWER

“Because of Kamtsa and Bar Kamtsa, Yerushalayim was destroyed” (Gittin 55b). Kamtsa, from kometz, a handful.

Kometz is a handful. Kamtsa is the man who folds in on himself, who becomes a small handful and wants to mix with no one. He has his circle of friends, his ideological inspirations, his party; whoever is not part of it cannot be one of his own. And if one sets the words ahavah and sin'ah, love and hatred, one above the other and cuts them down the middle, the same letters are found on either side: hatred raises an impassable partition between one cell and another — but an overly exclusive love raises one too.

The excluded man, for his part, asks to stay. He offers to pay for his meal, then for half the banquet, then for the whole banquet — so long as people do not cut each other off, even with divergent views, even with opposing beliefs. He is thrown out.

Yet present there were not only the finest of the land, but all the masters. They should have made themselves heard, said something. But they did not want to displease; they were guests: they witnessed a public humiliation and saw nothing.

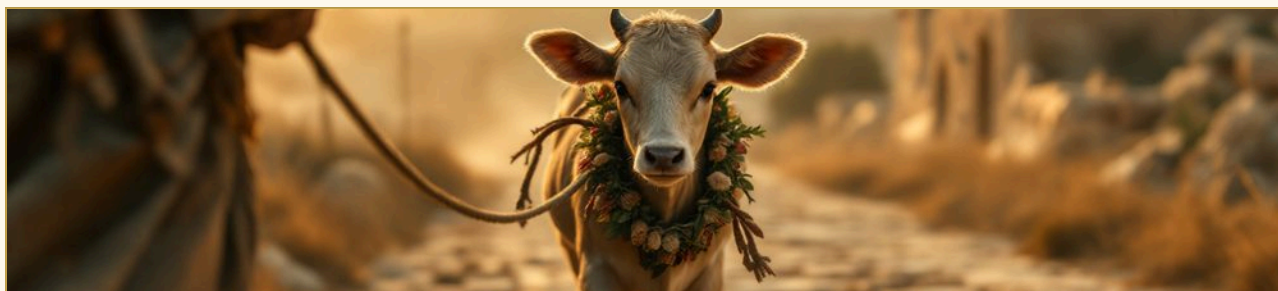
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The motives of the destruction are not to be sought outside: they must be sought within us, in our own ranks, in the intolerance we maintain toward one another.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The question is not only who threw the other out, but who sat at the table and kept silent. When, this year, did we see someone humiliated in front of us without saying anything? And what will we say next time?

The lip and the eye



PRESENTATION

Humiliated, Bar Kamtsa goes to denounce the sages to Rome: they are preparing a revolt; send them an offering and you will see whether they accept it. On the way, he makes a small wound on the animal's lip — or on its eye.

THE QUESTION

Why that particular blemish, and what does the way the sages ruled reveal?

THE ANSWER

“The humility of Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkulas destroyed our house, burned our Sanctuary and exiled us from our land” (Gittin 56a).

The Maharal of Prague explains it: the eye is chochmah, the way of seeing things and apprehending the universe; the lip is expression, the way of articulating it. For a foreigner's offering, such a blemish was tolerable; for a Jew's, it was not.

One sage refuses to offer the animal: people would say the Temple accepts any animal at all; it would open the door to abuses. Another proposes doing away with the informer. The answer: for a blemish in an animal, one does not sacrifice a life. They did neither. The emperor concluded: these are separatists who refuse all openness. And the army was sent.

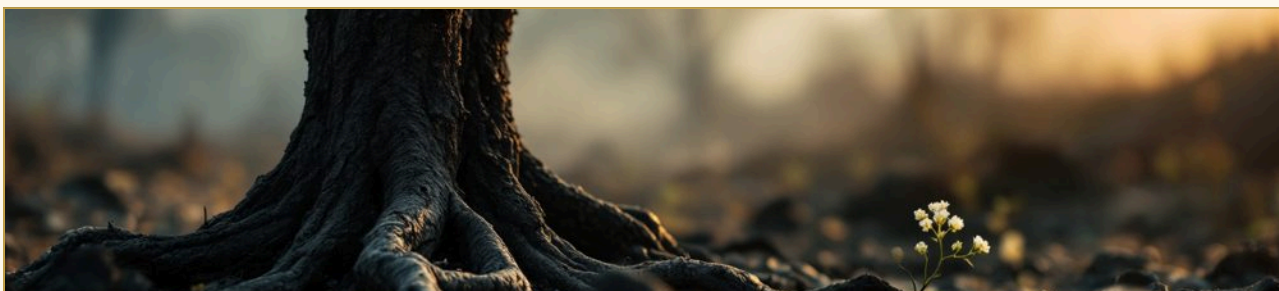
The destruction, says the Rav, implicates the responsibility of several circles: those who seek the favor of the powerful, those who despise the layers of society not of their rank, and those who abuse their power by stubbornly clinging to their way of ruling on the law. This indecision, this false humility, set the Sanctuary on fire.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Sometimes we do not decide, out of caution, and that caution costs dearly. Which family decision have we left hanging “so as not to offend anyone”? What would it take to finally make it, with courage and without contempt?

SUBJECT 08

A branch of light in the enemy's house



PRESENTATION

The midrash tells that Nero, sent against Yerushalayim, wanted to know his fate. He shot arrows in every direction: all of them fell back toward Yerushalayim. Then he asked a child for the verse he had learned that day.

THE QUESTION

What does this story come to teach in the middle of the account of the destruction?

THE ANSWER

“I will take My vengeance on Edom by the hand of My people Israel” (Yechezkel 25:14; Gittin 56a).

The child recites to him: I will take My vengeance on Edom. Nero understands: G-d wants His Sanctuary destroyed, and He will hold to account the one who does it. According to the midrash, he flees and converts — and from him, our sages say, came Rabbi Meir, the master of the Mishnah, the one who enlightened the eyes of Israel.

Whether or not Rabbi Meir is connected to Nero, one thing is certain for the Rav: his origins are not entirely Jewish. The lesson is considerable: even the fiercest enemy of Israel can carry in his descendants a branch that will illuminate the genius of Israel.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Even in misfortune, even in exile, great things can still be accomplished.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Sometimes we file someone away forever in the column of adversaries. Do we know a story — in the family or around us — in which an adversary became an ally, or gave something beautiful? What does it teach us?

Twenty-one years of provisions



PRESENTATION

Vespasian besieges Yerushalayim. Three great fortunes have placed all their wealth at the service of the defenders: enough to hold out for twenty-one years. A spiritual city like Yerushalayim, says the Maharal, does not fall quickly.

THE QUESTION

Why did the city fall nonetheless, and what did Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai save?

THE ANSWER

“Give me Yavneh and its sages” (Gittin 56b).

The factions running the city could not agree: some wanted to attack the enemy head-on, others to attempt a dialogue, and no common language was possible. To force the starving people to take up arms, they burned the food stores. Without this division, the city might never have opened its gates.

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai has himself carried out of the city by pretending to be dead, and obtains from Vespasian Yavneh and its sages: so that at least the people's spirituality would not be harmed. Other masters nevertheless blamed him: he should not have yielded to the enemy's pressure, but sought from within the strength to reunite the people.

At the end of his life, King Chizkiyahu, who had resisted the Assyrians, appears to him and reassures him: you acted rightly; the circumstances were not the same. In Chizkiyahu's time, Torah study united the land from north to south.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

What decided the fate of the exile was first and foremost baseless hatred, pushed to the very end between the different factions.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

A family too may have enough to hold out a long time — and ruin itself through its quarrels. In our disagreements, have we ever “burned the stores” to force the other to our view? How can we keep a common language when we disagree on strategy?

Exile as therapy



PRESENTATION

A listener questions the Rav about “original sin” and the destruction of the Temple. The Rav stops him at once: avoid that expression.

THE QUESTION

If exile is not a punishment, what is it?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “Exile is a therapy; it is not a punishment.”

There is no original sin, says the Rav; the expression is foreign to Judaism. No sin weighs on our shoulders that we cannot rid ourselves of. There is the fault of man, the one every person commits: by dint of wanting to assert oneself in one's entirety, one inevitably errs. We must start from the principle that we never hold the whole truth.

The word punishment has meaning only if it has an educational purpose, if it carries a remedy. Otherwise, one would have to imagine a G-d who takes revenge, who lowers Himself to our level. Every act has consequences: one pays the bill, and one can make up for them, recover from them. It is in this sense that exile is a therapy.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

A father who punished his son in an irreparable way — that is not permitted: he would have ceased to be a father.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

When someone at home makes a mistake, do we seek to punish or to heal? Think of a recent sanction: did it have an educational purpose, or only the relief of our anger? How can we make our reactions a remedy?