

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

THE FAST DAYS

10 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Table

Ten questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture "Tisha be-Av: The Destruction of the First Temple": what had already given way within before the walls gave way, why the Tablets had to be broken, and why the lament is written with the letters of a question. For the Rav, ruin is never the last word.



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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SUBJECT 01

Ruin begins within



PRESENTATION

After the glorious reign of Shlomo, the land splits: the kingdom of Israel in the north, that of Yehudah in the south. Assyria carries off the first; Yehudah survives for nearly a century, until Nevuchadnetzar sounds the death knell of its ruin.

THE QUESTION

What weakened the people even before the enemy armies arrived?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “This tension between the secular world and the religious world is not new; it is ancient.”

The Rav calls the kingdom of Israel the secular kingdom, and that of Yehudah the religious kingdom, in quotation marks. This tension considerably weakened the people's resistance to its enemies' assaults.

Yoshiyahu, however, was a model king, jealous both of the land's independence and of faithfulness to the charter of the Torah. When the great powers clash, he flatly refuses to let them cross his country; he will fall to the arrows of the Egyptian archers. His successors will have none of his virtues, and their ill-conducted revolts will hasten the siege.

On the 17th of Tammuz, the wall gives way: it is the first breach. Yet inside the walls, three factions were vying for control of the resistance, which weakened the defense still further. On the 9th of Av, the Babylonian troops overrun Yerushalayim and put it to fire and sword.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Walls rarely fall all at once: they give way first where there is quarreling inside. Which quarrel in our home weakens the house more than any outside difficulty? What could we do so that the “factions” become a family again?

SUBJECT 02

The Tablets had to be broken



PRESENTATION

The 17th of Tammuz opens the Three Weeks. On that day the first Tablets were broken, the daily offering ceased, Apostomos burned the Torah, and an idol was set up in the Sanctuary. Four calamities, a single date.

THE QUESTION

What links these four events — and why would the breaking of the Tablets be, in the Creator's design, a condition rather than an accident?

THE ANSWER

The events of the 17th of Tammuz: the first Tablets broken, the daily offering stopped, the Torah burned by Apostomos, the idol set up in the Sanctuary.

Without the breaking of the first Tablets, there would be no Oral Law and no second Tablets. The first Tablets are those of the Written Law. And everything that is written and recorded in such a way that nothing in it can move any more is destined to be broken: it must be given the capacity to express itself orally, through each person who thinks it, feels it and expresses it in his own way.

It is the same reason that brings the daily offering, the repetitive, to an end. And the Torah burned by Apostomos is preserved by the oral way: this belongs, says the Rav, to the Creator's designs for saving the witness people.

For we are not simply a people, a crowd of persons, a national entity: we are a moral entity, witness to a history, a word, a revelation. The break inscribed in the history of the law of Israel is necessary, because it is what allows that law to rise again in a new form.

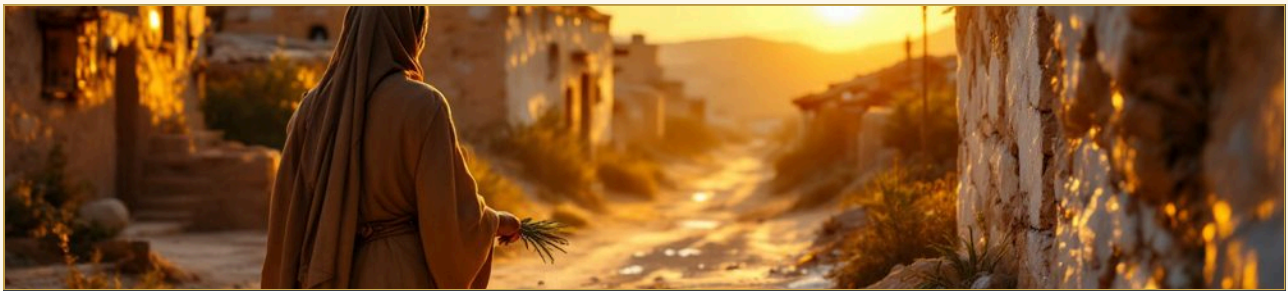
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Without the breaking of the first Tablets of the Law, there would be no Oral Law, there would be no second Tablets of the Law.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We call faithfulness what is sometimes mere repetition. What in our home — a habit, a rule, a phrase repeated every year — now holds only through inertia? Are we ready to let it break so that it can speak again, or will we wait for it to break on its own?

Death at the heart of life



PRESENTATION

The Rav asserts that the Jewish people integrates death into life. A listener objects: every philosophy links death to life; where is the difference?

THE QUESTION

In what way does Jewish thought integrate death into life, instead of placing it at life's far end?

THE ANSWER

“You shall love the L-rd your G-d... with all your soul” (Devarim 6:5) — Rabbi Akiva: even if He takes your soul.

For other religions, death represents another order, another realm, located at the far end of life. Here, death is part of life: it allows a new beginning, a recycling of being for oneself and for generations to come. There is no death that does not carry a new life within it. That is why the woman who has released the life she was carrying becomes temporarily impure: death and life interact at the same moment.

Rabbi Akiva could love G-d with all his soul, even when He was taking his soul, because death was not an end in itself for him. It was, as the Maharal of Prague says, an absence: the person no longer answers the call, but he is busy with something else; he is preparing something else.

So, as the day of Tisha BeAv wanes, a renewal is already beginning: the women would go out to whitewash the fronts of their houses. There was a wish to abolish this custom, then it was kept — the renewal of life must not be separated from the inevitable crisis.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We have not yet reached that level; it is very difficult; it is a becoming, an ideal.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Every family has its absent ones. How do we speak of them: as those who have left, or as those who “are preparing something else” through us? What have we received from them that lives on at our table?

Mishkan: four letters, four pillars



PRESENTATION

For the Rav, the whole life of the people revolves around four notions, inscribed in a single word: Mishkan, the Sanctuary. Its four letters can be read as four initials.

THE QUESTION

If the Sanctuary bears four functions in its very name, which one was missing on the eve of the destruction — and which one is missing today around our table?

THE ANSWER

The four letters of the word Mishkan: mem, shin, kaf, nun.

Mem is the Melech, the king, guarantor of order and of the constitution. Shin is the Shofet, the judge, who uses his reason to consider each situation and legislate accordingly. Kaf is the Kohen, the spiritual guide, the teacher, who ensures the intellectual and spiritual advancement of the people. Nun is the Navi, who bears witness to the divine and gives the teaching a new breath: today, these are the great figures of our generation.

When even one of these letters is missing, the people's history limps: without a guarantor of order, without a guarantor of law, without an inspirer, without worthy teachers to ensure continuity. But as long as the Torah is preserved and drawn upon, an awakening is assured, sooner or later.

And to those who object that we no longer have king, judge or prophet, the Rav answers: each person carries this Mishkan. One must be one's own Shofet, one's own Kohen, one's own Navi.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Even if prophecy no longer exists, a holy spirit still animates exceptional people, and they have the duty to inspire the people.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each of us here carries the four letters. Let each say which is weakest in him: the order he does not keep, the judgment he does not make, what he no longer teaches, or the inspiration he gives to no one. And which one does he want to raise up again this year?

“I remain king”



PRESENTATION

Yirmiyahu comes before King Yehoyakim and reads him his lamentations. The king listens verse after verse, and always gives the same answer.

THE QUESTION

What does the king's reaction reveal, and why do we still read the scroll he burned?

THE ANSWER

“Yirmiyahu took another scroll and gave it to Baruch son of Neriyah, the scribe” (Yirmiyahu 36:32).

How she sits alone, the populous city; she has become like a widow. “But I remain her king.” She has become a tributary. “I remain her king.” She weeps in the night, all her friends have betrayed her. “I remain king.” The essential thing, for him, is to go on occupying his throne, whatever the conditions.

But when the prophet comes to the cause — her adversaries have gained the upper hand, for the L-rd has afflicted her for the multitude of her sins — the king takes the scroll and burns it. Yirmiyahu must dictate it a second time, from his prison, to his scribe Baruch ben Neriyah. It is this text that the Geonim instituted as the reading for the 9th of Av: an awakening of the whole people.

It is told that Napoleon, passing through Strasbourg, heard those reading the elegies weeping and said: if after two thousand years this people still weeps for its lost nation, it will one day find it again.

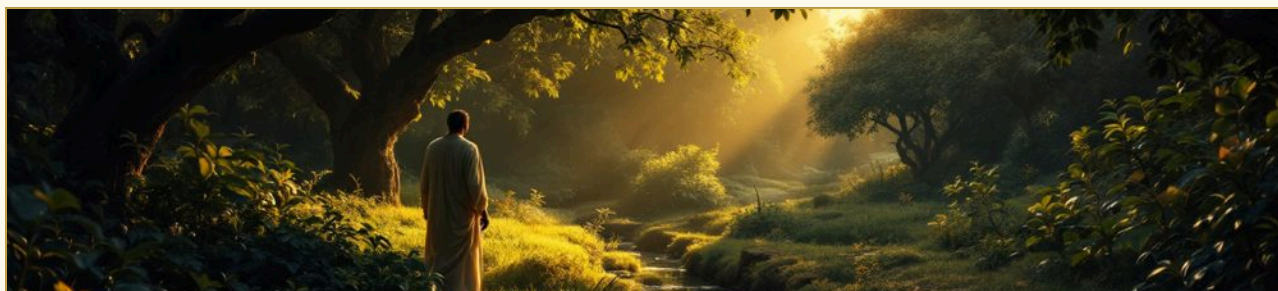
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is an awakening of the whole people.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

It is tempting to hear bad news asking only: “do I keep my place?” When did we react that way to criticism? And which unpleasant truth did we prefer to “burn” rather than hear to the end?

Eichah and Ayekah: the same letters



PRESENTATION

On the evening of the 9th of Av, Eichah is read by candlelight. The word means “how”. But its letters are exactly those of another question, the very first that G-d ever asked a man, in the garden.

THE QUESTION

If “how” and “where are you” are written with the same letters, is the lamentation a statement about the past, or a question addressed to us now?

THE ANSWER

“Where are you?” (Bereshit 3:9); “How can I alone bear your burden?” (Devarim 1:12); “How has the faithful city become a harlot?” (Yeshayahu 1:21); “How she sits alone” (Eichah 1:1).

The first resonance of Eichah lies in the challenge put to man: Ayekah, where are you, where do you stand? You have eaten of the tree of knowledge and you are hiding; instead of showing that you were able to integrate evil into good and death into life, you feel naked, incapable. So you will have to go out into exile, you will take stock of what you want and what you must be, and you will return to the place conceived for you. The Land of Israel, says the Rav, is something like the Eden of the Jewish people.

There are, moreover, three Eichahs in the Tanakh. Moshe: how can I alone bear your burden, your disputes, your quarrels. Yesheyahu: how has the faithful city become a harlot. Yirmiyahu: how she sits alone. And our sages say that all three are found in the first of all, which is Ayekah.

Exiled from its Eden, the people learns among the nations that this solitude, mocked by the world, is not an enviable situation: it must think of returning.

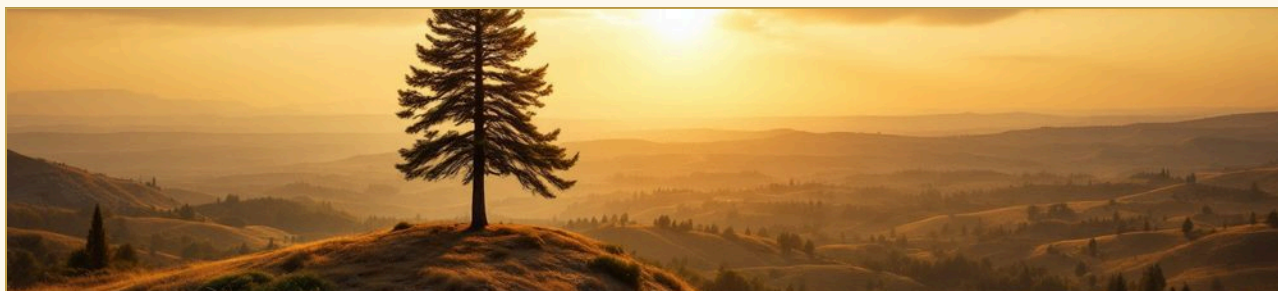
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The reading of Eichah on the evening of Tisha BeAv is not simply a lament over the past, but a reflection on what our direction for the future must be.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Ayekah does not ask what happened, but where one stands. Let each one answer for himself: where am I in relation to what I wanted to be a year ago? And what is the exact place in my life where I am hiding?

Three letters without a companion



PRESENTATION

Yirmiyahu opens his lamentations with a word: badad, alone. The Gaon of Vilna went looking for this solitude in the alphabet itself, pairing the letters two by two by their value.

THE QUESTION

Three letters of the Hebrew alphabet are left without a companion. What does this solitude say about a people — and how is it to be distinguished from abandonment?

THE ANSWER

“Behold, you are beautiful, my companion... there is no blemish in you” (Shir HaShirim); “It is a people that dwells alone and is not reckoned among the nations” (Bamidbar 23:9).

Alef and Tet make ten, Bet and Chet make ten, Gimel and Zayin make ten. When we reach Hei, there is no more pair: it has no counterpart. The same goes for the tens: Yud and Tzadi, Kaf and Peh, Lamed and Ayin pair up, but Nun, fifty, remains alone. And the same for the hundreds, including the final letters: the final Kaf remains, with no companion.

These three letters without a companion, says the Gaon of Vilna, form the word hinach: behold, you are beautiful, my companion, and there is no blemish in you. That is the model G-d wished to present to the people bearing His testimony, and that is why this people will remain alone: it will unite with no one outside, it will associate itself with no foreign deity. It will be alone, and it will not be reckoned among the nations.

It is this badad, this solitude, that Yirmiyahu will weep over in his lamentations.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The L-rd wanted it to be alone; He leads it.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There are solitary people around this table: one who is alone because he holds a position, and one who is alone because he has been left aside. Can we tell them apart? And to whom must we say this year that he is not alone because he is wrong, but alone because he stands firm?

An alphabet out of order



PRESENTATION

Eichah is written as an acrostic: its chapters follow the order of the Hebrew alphabet, one of them three times over. But the last chapter, which does have twenty-two verses, does not follow the order of the letters. And the book closes with a disconcerting verse.

THE QUESTION

What do this final disorder and this last verse say about G-d's anger?

THE ANSWER

“Bring us back to You, O L-rd, and we shall return... For have You utterly rejected us, are You exceedingly angry with us?” (Eichah 5:21-22).

Each letter of the Torah has its own autonomy and meaning: the letter itself, the crown above it, the vowel that orients it, and the white space around it. If in a Sefer Torah one letter touches another, it is invalid: the letter has been deprived of its inspiration. The last chapter of Eichah, out of alphabetical order, speaks of confusion — but also of consolation, for it calls for things to be set back in order. A Chassidic thought says that the Mashiach will put this chapter back in order.

One would have liked to end on the prayer “Bring us back to You”. But the last verse speaks of rejection. It must be heard as a burst of anger, not as a rejection: an outburst that will pass. We trust You.

The people is called to be the people of eternity — but of eternity in a movement of permanent rebirth.

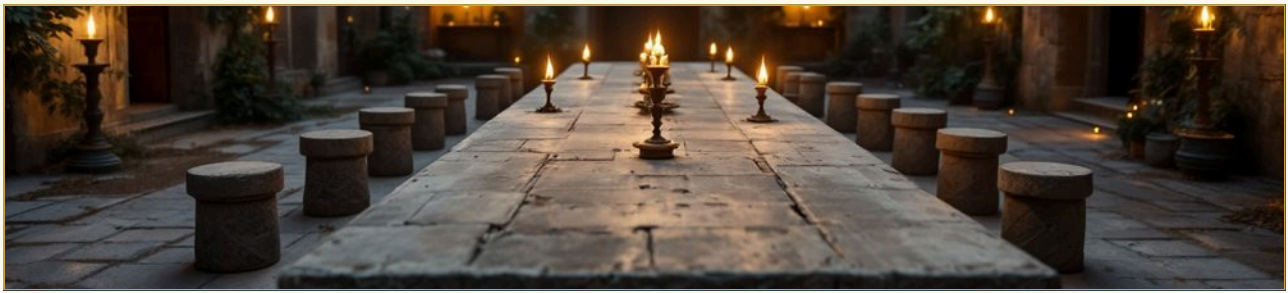
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

G-d's anger is limited in time.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In a family too, there are bursts of anger that look like rejections. How do we make the other understand that our anger is an outburst and not a break? And after a quarrel, who takes the first step to set things back in order?

Seventy years, or no end in sight



PRESENTATION

The First Temple was destroyed for very grave sins — idolatry, immorality, bloodshed — and yet the exile ended after seventy years. The Second, destroyed for baseless hatred, has still not found its resolution.

THE QUESTION

Why is baseless hatred harder to repair than the gravest sins?

THE ANSWER

Our sages: the First Temple was destroyed for idolatry, immorality and bloodshed; the Second for baseless hatred (Yoma 9b).

G-d showed Himself conciliatory toward the sins of the First Temple, says the Rav, because they arose from uncontrollable situations. They could be repaired at the end of a seventy-year cycle: whenever the number seven appears, it is a life cycle that requires a fresh start, like the Shemittah every seven years and the Jubilee in the fiftieth year.

Baseless hatred, however, divided the people. What is idolatry? It is clinging to a single idea, a single way of thinking — even in Torah — without admitting that another point of view, another mode of interpretation, could exist. It is turning the word of G-d into an idol. If the Torah, made to unite, divides people, the door is open to every perversion.

The messianic era is delayed because we have not yet spoken to one another at a mature level, without taking extreme positions. At Sinai, for all its diversity, Israel came together as one man.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

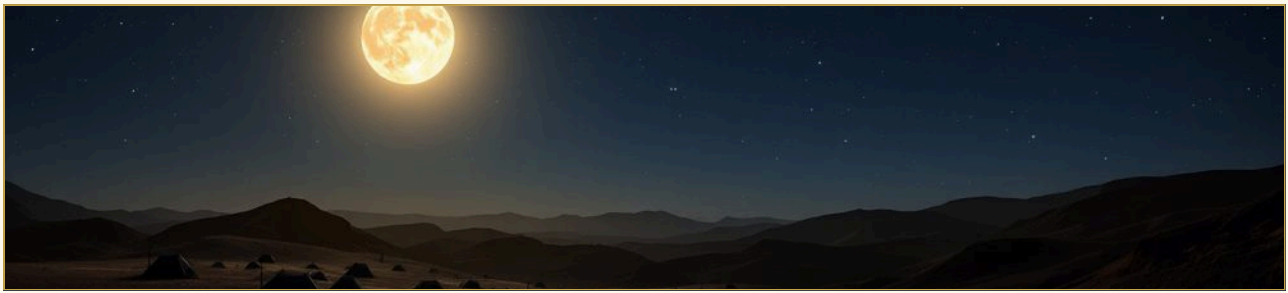
We have not yet spoken to one another — not at a mature level.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Some family quarrels arise not from a fault, but from a certainty: “there is only one way of seeing it”. On what subject does each of us cling to his single idea? Let us try tonight to set out the other person's point of view honestly.

SUBJECT 10

Better the Sanctuary than the people



PRESENTATION

Why did Moshe not enter the promised land? The Rav takes up an idea of the sages: everything Moshe built was eternal. Had he built the Temple, it could never have been destroyed.

THE QUESTION

Why would an indestructible Temple have been a danger rather than a blessing?

THE ANSWER

“The face of Moshe was like the face of the sun; the face of Yehoshua like the face of the moon” (Bava Batra 75a).

Moshe's Temple would have stood there forever — but the people could not have measured up to its demands of holiness. On the day of anger, G-d would have poured it out not on the stones and the trees, but on the people. And it is better that He destroy His Sanctuary than His people.

Moshe was a sun: so blinding that he had to put a veil over his face. Yehoshua was like the moon, which only receives light and reflects it. But the moon has one ability: in the dead of night, while giving light, it allows the little stars to show their presence.

Such is the man of the land: the one who leaves room for all the small ones around him, so that they can express themselves, assert themselves and fulfil themselves.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is better that He destroy His Sanctuary than that He destroy His people.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Some in a family are suns: they light up everything, but no one can see anyone else. Others are moons that let the little stars shine. Which are we at home? And whom could we help to shine this week?