

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

THE FAST DAYS

10 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Table

Ten questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture "The Tenth of Tevet: The Fast That Opens the Destruction": why fast for a siege that destroyed nothing, why this fast is never postponed, and what is dark about the month of Tevet. Down to the Rav's distinction: a people survives wandering; strangulation threatens it far more.



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

Four fasts, a single sequence



PRESENTATION

Four fasts of the year revolve around the destruction of the Temple. The Tenth of Tevet opens them: Nevuchadnetzar lays siege to Yerushalayim, with no breach and no ruin. The prophet Zechariah names all four — but he lists that of the tenth month last.

THE QUESTION

What links these four dates, and what does the prophet promise concerning them?

THE ANSWER

“The fast of the fourth month, the fast of the fifth, the fast of the seventh and the fast of the tenth shall be for the house of Yehudah joy and gladness... Love truth and peace” (Zechariah 8:19).

The Tenth of Tevet, the siege; two and a half years later, the 17th of Tammuz, the breach in the wall; the Ninth of Av, the destruction of the Temple and the beginning of exile; finally the 3rd of Tishrei, the loss of national identity, with the murder by a Jew of the last governor who had been installed. These four dates form a sequence, and the Tenth of Tevet is its first term.

Yet it is the one Zechariah lists last. The Rav notes the oddity: this fast, which sounds the alarm of the people's decline and of the imminent fall of the kingdom of Yehudah, should have come first.

The prophet nevertheless announces that these fasts will be turned into joy, gladness and festive days, and he sets a condition: to love truth and peace. The Rav reads it this way: seek truth before peace, truth clearing the way for peace.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It sounds the alarm of the people's decline and of the imminent fall of the kingdom of Judah.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The beginning of a misfortune often goes unnoticed: a siege, not yet a breach. What “Tenth of Tevet” have we let pass in our family — a first sign we did not want to see? And what truth would need to be spoken for peace to return?

SUBJECT 02

A fast that is never postponed



PRESENTATION

The Ninth of Av, which commemorates the very destruction of the Temple, is postponed to Sunday if it falls on Shabbat. The Tenth of Tevet, which commemorates only a siege, would have to be kept on Shabbat itself. The sages arranged the calendar so that this never happens — but the rule stands.

THE QUESTION

Why would the fast for a mere siege be more “fixed” than the fast for the destruction?

THE ANSWER

“Son of man, write down the name of the day, this very day” (Yechezkel 24:2).

There is only one communal fast kept on Shabbat: Kippur. It is not postponed, because the text specifies “on this very day”: the essence of that day is the day of Kippur, and moving it to the next day is not possible. Yet the same precision appears for the Tenth of Tevet: the prophet is ordered to write down the name and the essence of the day on which the king of Babylon began the siege of Yerushalayim.

One other fast is permitted on Shabbat: the one that follows a nightmare. The bad dream keeps the person from tasting the pleasure of Shabbat; the best way to clear it away is to fast on that day. This says what a fast is: an awakening of awareness. The Rambam makes it the start of repentance and a resumption of life, an entirely new direction.

The Tenth of Tevet thus suggests that it opens a decisive turning point in the history of the people. The Maharal of Prague would say that it is the source, the origin, the essence of the whole disintegration of the people and of its exile.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

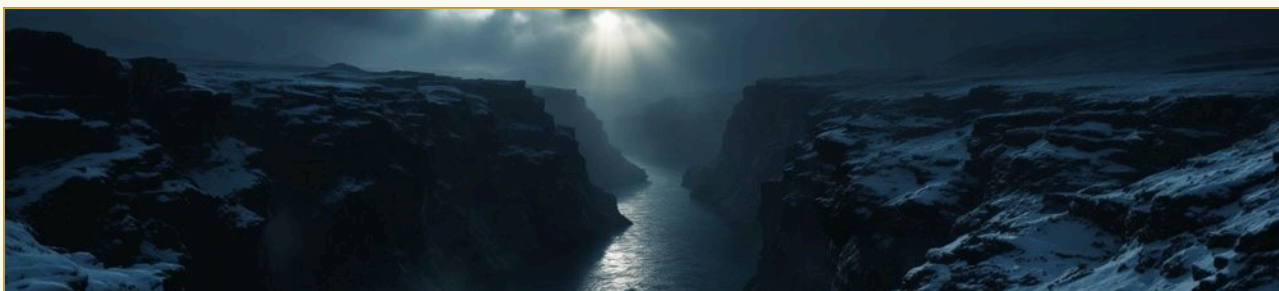
A fast is an awakening of awareness, quite simply.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

A bad dream can spoil a whole Shabbat. What, at the moment, keeps us from fully tasting our family joys? And what awakening — rather than a postponement — could free us from it?

SUBJECT 03

The month of Dan and the letter of the eye



PRESENTATION

Just as the festivals are attributed to the Patriarchs, the months are attributed to the twelve tribes. Tevet is the portion of Dan. And each month has its letter, related to its events: that of Tevet is the ayin, the eye.

THE QUESTION

What do the tribe and the letter of the month say about the darkness proper to Tevet?

THE ANSWER

“And darkness was upon the face of the deep” (Bereshit 1:2); “G-d has judged me”, danani Elokim (Bereshit 30:6).

Dan, son of Bilhah, brought into Yaakov's family tree, brings to it the notion of justice: in naming him, Rachel says “danani Elokim”, G-d has judged me.

The meaning of a letter is read from its first appearance in the Torah. The tet appears first in the word tov: G-d saw that the light was good; it is connected to light. The ayin, however, appears first in “and darkness was upon the face of the deep”. This darkness, says the Rav, is proper to the month of Tevet.

For three misfortunes piled up in it, so much so that the ancients fasted three days in a row, the 8th, 9th and 10th: the translation of the Bible into Greek, the death of Ezra the Scribe, the siege of Yerushalayim. Three dimmings of the light in a single month.

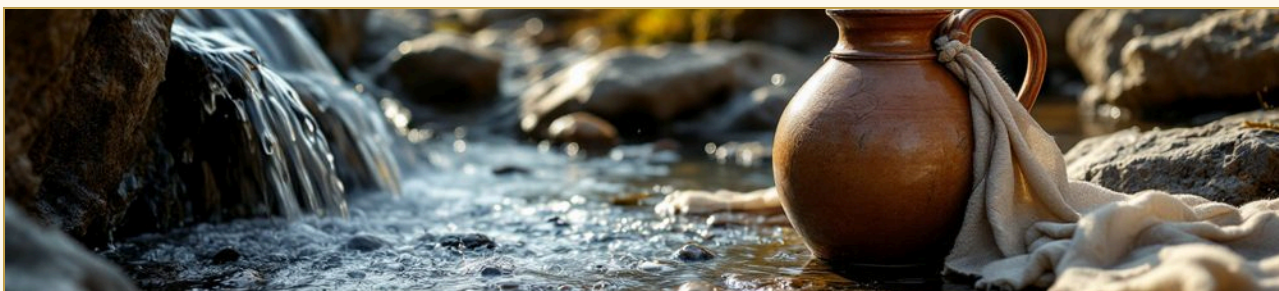
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

A dimming of the light took place during this month.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Dan brings justice, and the letter of the month is the eye. How do we look at one another at home: with the eye that judges or with the eye that illuminates? Let each one tell of a time he was judged too quickly, and a time someone truly saw him well.

The Torah dressed in Greek



PRESENTATION

On the 8th of Tevet, the Bible was translated into Greek — into the Greek language, the Rav specifies, not into Greek script. Our sages compared that day to the day the golden calf was made. The comparison is surprising: does a translation not make the Torah accessible to all?

THE QUESTION

Why is a translation mourned like the day of the golden calf?

THE ANSWER

Our sages: the day the Torah was translated into Greek was as hard for Israel as the day the golden calf was made.

The golden calf, says the Rav, is not idolatry in itself: it is a garment put on faith. Things are no longer grasped directly, in their intensity and their essence; they are dressed up. In the same way, the Torah was dressed in the Greek language. The people then seems to suffer from myopia: it no longer sees things at the source; it sees them at one remove.

For Hebrew is not one language among others. Every language carries a strand of prophecy, but Hebrew is the language of creation, the one through which the Torah was given. Each letter in it is the source of several meanings, and that is what gave the sages who study the Torah a strand of prophecy even after prophecy had ceased.

To truly understand the Torah, then, one would have to study it in its original language.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The Jewish people seems to suffer from myopia: it no longer sees things at the source, at their origin.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Every translation both helps and veils. Which Hebrew word from our prayers or our festivals would we like to understand “at the source”? Let each one choose one and find out, before next time, what it says that the translation does not.

Ezra, or the end of prophecy



PRESENTATION

On the 9th of Tevet died Ezra the Scribe, whom our sages identify with Malachi, the last prophet. With him the period of the prophets ends and that of the interpretation of the Oral Law begins.

THE QUESTION

What is lost, and what is gained, when prophecy gives way to the Oral Law?

THE ANSWER

Our sages: had the Torah not been given through Moshe, Ezra would have been worthy of transmitting it to Israel.

Ezra was capable of restoring the Torah and of fashioning the second Tablets himself. Yet there is a gap between the first and the second: in the first, a transparency of Moshe's face; in the second, the hand of man slipped in to fashion them, and with it a certain opacity. His death opens a rupture.

The Oral Law too is a garment, but a living garment. Its interpretation lends itself to different, sometimes opposing meanings, and that is its genius: it gives the Written Torah a human and universal reach, recognized as animated by the holy spirit. That is why one who is present at a sage's last breath tears his garment: he is losing a Torah that was that man's own contribution to the whole community of Israel.

But every garment has its drawback, and the first is that it considerably dims the light of the text.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The Oral Torah is the personal contribution of each one of us.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each sage takes with him a Torah no one else carried. What word, what way of understanding, did we receive from a parent or teacher who has passed away? And what personal share would we like to leave in our turn?

The flesh and the sap



PRESENTATION

The siege of Yerushalayim was not the people's first misfortune. Long before, Assyria had destroyed the kingdom of Israel and deported its inhabitants. Yet no fast commemorates that destruction.

THE QUESTION

Why do we mourn the siege by Bavel, and not the ruin inflicted by Ashur?

THE ANSWER

“Israel is a scattered sheep that lions have driven away: first the king of Ashur devoured it, and last Nevuchadnetzar, king of Bavel, has broken its bones” (Yirmiyahu 50:17).

The prophet does place the two on the same level. But our sages drew a distinction: Ashur ate the flesh of the Jewish people; Bavel touched its sap. As long as the sap was there, the people could still be rebuilt. The one who put it in danger of annihilation was Nevuchadnetzar: so it is he who serves as the reference point for decline and exile.

And why did Yerushalayim fall? As long as the Temple stood, the people believed itself invincible: G-d would never dare touch His own Sanctuary; He would defend it at all costs. A mistake, says the Rav.

The people had begun by disconnecting the world from its source of inspiration. The junction between heaven and earth that the Sanctuary represented no longer existed in people's consciousness; it was even fought against. From then on, the Sanctuary was no longer spared.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

As long as the sap was there, the people could still be rebuilt.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

One can lose a great deal and rebuild, as long as the sap is there. What is the “sap” of our family — what, as long as we keep it, allows everything to be rebuilt? Are we truly protecting it, or do we think it untouchable?

The Name absent from Miketz and Vayigash



PRESENTATION

Tevet is the month in which we read the story of Yosef and his brothers, that split within the people. The Rav points out that in two parashiyot, Miketz and Vayigash, only the name Elokim is found: the Name of Hashem is absent.

THE QUESTION

What does this absence mean, and where does the Name reappear?

THE ANSWER

“I hope for Your salvation, O L-rd” (Bereshit 49:18).

Elokim designates the earthly forces, the forces of creation, the attribute of justice; it is the name shared with other deities. The other Name designates what lies beyond creation and governs Elokim itself. It is this Name that the people forgets, contenting itself with Elokim — as it would later demand at the foot of the mountain, even though it had seen the manifestation of Hashem.

The Name reappears in Yaakov's blessing to Dan. Yaakov sees Shimshon, of the tribe of Dan, pass by, and thinks he recognizes in him the conduct of a leader and judge of Israel — but both his eyes were put out: the eye, once again. It is then that he says: I hope for Your salvation, O L-rd.

This is not to be heard as a cry of despair, says the Rav. It is a blessing: the demand to associate Hashem with our way of seeing and shaping our history, so as not to sink into confinement.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Hashem should be associated with our way of seeing, of shaping our history.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Everything can be explained by circumstances: nature, the economy, politics. In which event of our lives did we see only the circumstances — and where could we now recognize a hand that goes beyond them?

Wandering or suffocating



PRESENTATION

There are two ways of persecuting a people. The Rav names them Ashur and Mitzrayim, Assyria and Egypt. The siege of the Tenth of Tevet, he says, belongs to the second — and it is the more serious.

THE QUESTION

Why is confinement more threatening for a people than wandering?

THE ANSWER

“In the siege and in the distress”, be-matzor u-ve-matzok (Devarim 28:53); “The L-rd will bring you back to Egypt in ships” (Devarim 28:68).

Ashur moved populations from one place to another, so that no one recognized himself where he was: he loses his roots and his identity and becomes a wanderer, always on the road. One thinks one has found a merciful place that welcomes you, and after a while everything changes and one must pack up again. It is a remediable evil.

The irremediable evil is that of Egypt. It does not move you: it finds you a place, it substitutes another land for your land, it settles you on soil where you are surrounded by your enemies, and you can no longer breathe. That is what the text of the siege says: in narrowness and strangulation. Not being able to spread out, not being able to flourish, remaining confined within imposed borders: that is the gravest threat to Israel's future.

That is why the last of the curses is the return to Egypt: having to start one's whole history over again.

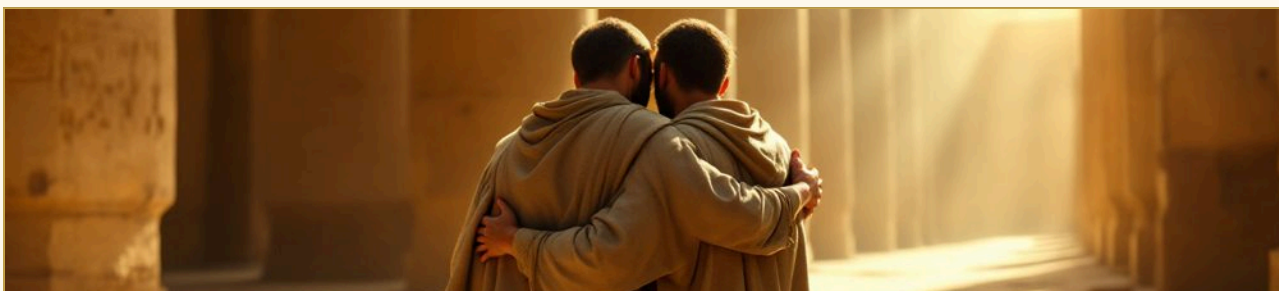
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Not being able to spread out, not being able to flourish, is the gravest threat of annihilation.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There are those we push away and those we shut in. In our families too: whom have we kept at a distance, and whom have we shut into a role he can no longer leave — the difficult one, the fragile one? And which of the two suffocates more?

Two necks for two Temples



PRESENTATION

When Yosef is reunited with Binyamin, he falls upon his “necks” — in the plural — and weeps; Binyamin weeps upon Yosef’s neck. With our sages, the Rav reads in this weeping over sanctuaries yet to come, and a lesson about the tribe of Dan.

THE QUESTION

Over what do Yosef and Binyamin weep, and what is Dan doing in this story?

THE ANSWER

“He fell upon the necks of Binyamin his brother and wept, and Binyamin wept upon his neck” (Bereshit 45:14).

The plural designates at least two: Yosef weeps over the two Temples, the First and the Second, which were to fall within Binyamin’s portion. Binyamin, for his part, weeps upon Yosef over the fall of the Sanctuary of Shiloh.

Now that Sanctuary had near it the territory of Dan, the most neglected tribe of Israel. Yet Dan had been associated with the building of the first Sanctuary: Betzalel of Yehudah and Oholiav ben Achisamach of Dan were chosen together — two extremities deliberately joined, two strong tribes, both called lion cubs.

But while Yehudah remained the unconditional defender of Yerushalayim and the Temple, Dan went up to settle in the north, on the border between Israel and the other nations, and was not consistent with itself throughout history.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Yehudah and Dan had the same strength; one placed it in the service of the center, the other stationed itself on the border. Where do we put our strength: at the heart of our family, or always a little on the margins? And who among us defends the “center” for everyone else?

SUBJECT 10

From Babel to Bavel



PRESENTATION

Nevuchadnetzar reigns over Bavel, Babylon. For the Rav, this is no coincidence: his siege continues the attempt of the Tower of Babel, where people wanted to build a city and a tower.

THE QUESTION

What links the Tower of Babel, the confusion of languages and the siege of Yerushalayim?

THE ANSWER

“Come, let us go down and confuse their language there” (Bereshit 11:7).

At Babel, people wanted to build a city and a tower. The city, says the Rav, is Yerushalayim; the tower is the Temple. And G-d mixed all the languages there. Those who mastered the language of creation lost it in favor of derived languages — among them the Greek language. That was a first dimming of the light.

The Tenth of Tevet gathers all those that followed: the translation of the Torah into Greek, the death of Ezra, the last prophet, and the siege, that is, the confinement of the Jewish people.

All these accumulated dimmings of the light make the Tenth of Tevet an essential fast — so much so that it would be kept even if it coincided with Shabbat.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The Tenth of Tevet mourns a light that dims slowly, without a crash. What light in our home has dimmed without anyone noticing — a habit of study, a blessing, a conversation? What could we rekindle this week?