

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

# THE FAST DAYS

*10 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Table*

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Ten questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture "Tisha BeAv: Rising Above Oneself": why the Torah sometimes seems no longer to speak to us, what is missing from Iyov's faith, and why the Mashiach is born on the day of mourning. Rebuilding, says the Rav, will not come from elsewhere: it begins with what each of us overcomes within himself.



*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

### The Torah has not grown old

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#### PRESENTATION

On Tisha BeAv, it is forbidden to study Torah: its joy is denied us, as we mourn all that we have lost and all that we have not yet achieved. The Rav sees in this pause an invitation.

#### THE QUESTION

*If the Torah no longer speaks to us, is it the Torah that has grown old?*

#### THE ANSWER

**The Rav:** “It is not that the Torah is no longer relevant; it is we who are no longer relevant to the message of the Torah.”

There can be a reading of the Torah that is outdated for our age, for our level of culture, as we move forward. A pause is needed to take it up again, and to bring it up to date by bringing ourselves up to date.

For there are two ways of reading. One can subject the Torah and its mitzvot to analysis, as one subjects the science of things to one's mind in order to master it. One will certainly draw lessons from it, but it will always be a teaching cut off from its inner dimension.

Every reading of the Torah must pass through the spirit and through our inner stirring. Without this adherence of the person to the text he studies, to the mitzvah he practices, one discharges it like a duty imposed from outside.

#### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*Every reading of the Torah must be done through the spirit and our inner stirring.*

#### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

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Is there a text, a prayer, a custom that “no longer speaks to us”? Rather than declaring it outdated, let us ask what in us has stopped hearing it. Let each one choose a passage to reread this week with fresh eyes.

## SUBJECT 02

### “Al” or “le”: the mitzvah that comes from oneself



#### PRESENTATION

Our blessings do not all have the same form. We say “al ha-milah”, concerning circumcision; but the father who circumcises his son says “la-mul et ha-ben”, to circumcise the son. A preposition changes everything.

#### THE QUESTION

*What does this small grammatical difference say about the way we perform the mitzvot — and about the destruction of the Temple?*

#### THE ANSWER

**“... who has commanded us to kindle the Chanukah light”, le-hadlik ner Chanukah.**

When I circumcise my child, it is not a practice imposed on me from outside: it is an initiative, the fulfilment of the mitzvah by myself. Likewise, we do not say “al ner Chanukah” but “le-hadlik”, to kindle: it is my own light that extends itself through the light of Chanukah.

The practice of the mitzvot should follow this inner breath. Without it, there is neither love nor adherence; the mitzvah is not the expression of my nature, of my emunah.

That, says the Rav, is the heart of the destruction of the Temple. When the Sanctuary becomes a place external to us, where one goes to discharge the commandment, one draws only a minimal benefit from it. True renewal comes when I feel this need from within and look forward to it: then two lights meet, one outer, the other inner.

#### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*There is an extension of me: it is my own light that extends itself through the light of Chanukah.*

#### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There is what we do “concerning” something and what we truly do ourselves. Which mitzvah in our home could we move from obligation to initiative? Who wants to take it on?

## SUBJECT 03

### A man from a land no one can find

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#### PRESENTATION

“There was a man in the land of Utz.” Where is Utz? Near Damascus, in the Arabian peninsula... no one knows. Iyov is not Jewish, and his friends come from three different horizons.

#### THE QUESTION

*Why does the Bible take as its model a man of the nations, from a land no one can locate?*

#### THE ANSWER

**“There was a man in the land of Utz; Iyov was his name” (Iyov 1:1).**

Iyov is not necessarily a Jewish man: he is a man of the nations, but a believer. Where did he live? We do not know. This man is the emanation of no place: he is the prototype of the human being, on whatever continent. That is the universalism of biblical thought.

We do not all fit the same mold, says the Rav: there are different sensibilities, different personalities, different approaches to perceiving the divine. His three friends, who come from different regions, also regard themselves as having had visions of the divine: the revelation of G-d is reserved neither for a single people nor for a single segment of humanity.

But this quest, the Rav warns, is never free of pitfalls, trials and suffering. The righteous man knows no rest: what should be a time of rest for him is only a new departure toward another challenge.

#### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*This man is not the emanation of a place; he is the prototype of the human being.*

#### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

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We often learn from people very different from ourselves. Who, outside our own circle, once taught us something about faith, kindness or courage? Let us tell the story at the table.

## SUBJECT 04

### Fearing G-d without loving Him

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#### PRESENTATION

The book opens with a portrait: “blameless and upright, fearing G-d and shunning evil”. We read it as praise. The Rav reads in it a limitation.

#### THE QUESTION

*What is missing from a faith that knows only fear?*

#### THE ANSWER

***“That man was blameless and upright, fearing G-d and shunning evil” (Iyov 1:1).***

Where the Bible translates tam as blameless, the Rav would gladly say: naive. Iyov carries an elementary faith, a will to uprightness that can be respected, a fear of G-d that is not sustained by a love of G-d. When fear stands alone, it means that I am always afraid the sky will fall on my head, and that I had better walk straight if I do not want trouble. I then serve as a slave serves his master, not as a son serves his father.

Was he wise? The text does not say so. And nowhere does it say that Iyov performed an act of kindness toward his neighbor, toward his society: we are shown a man at peace with himself, fulfilled on every side.

So when G-d finally reveals Himself, He tells him in substance: you served Me, but you did not seek to know Me. And serving G-d without sharing this knowledge with those around one gives no access to His true designs.

#### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*I serve Him as a slave would serve his master, but not as a son would serve his father.*

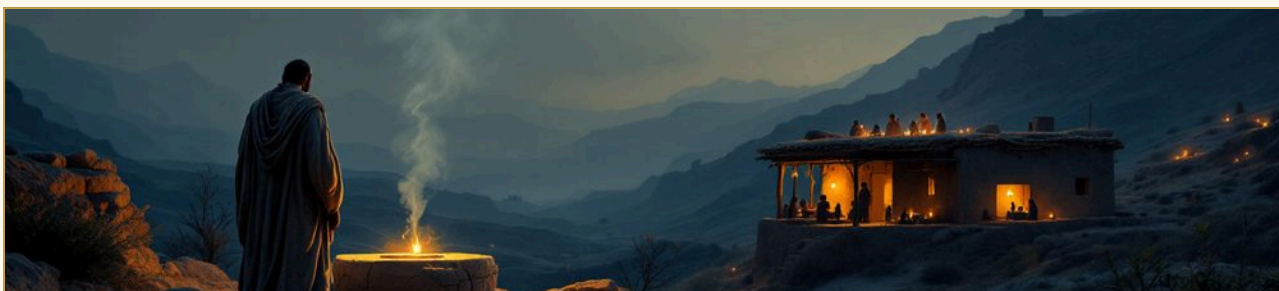
#### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

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We often obey out of fear of the consequences, in faith as in family. What do I do at home solely to avoid reproach? And what would remain of my gestures if no one kept count of them any more?

## SUBJECT 05

### He offered sacrifices instead of talking to them



#### PRESENTATION

Iyov has seven sons and three daughters. They hold feasts in turn, each in his own house. Their father, for his part, offers sacrifices for them — perhaps they have sinned, perhaps they have renounced G-d in their hearts.

#### THE QUESTION

*Iyov prays for his children without ever speaking to them. Might the book's first misfortune lie here, before any trial?*

#### THE ANSWER

***“Perhaps my sons have sinned and cursed G-d in their hearts” (Iyov 1:5).***

Before any trial, there is a rupture between parents and children, a fracture in the family. We always try to give our children everything; the question is whether what we have invested in them ensures a continuity beyond material support. Iyov gave everything, but his children did not show his qualities, and all he knew to do was offer sacrifices for them. He should have come down to their level rather than trying to bring them up to his: giving them a trade is a means of earning a living; it is not yet making them a ben adam.

When there is no dialogue with one's own children, it is not that they are strangers to our teaching; it is that they do not believe in us, and that we have not found the language that wins them over. Often a patriarchal spirit, a self-assurance one wants to impose, is at the root of it.

That is why, at the end of the book, Iyov gives his children new names. These are not other children: he finds them again, he finds the dialogue with them again. They were prisoners of a closed ideology that had not sought a common language.

#### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*The first “beyond” of one's being is, first of all, the child.*

#### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Paying for one's children is easier than talking to them. What did I give my children, or my parents, this year that cost only money or worry? And what sentence, long left unsaid, must finally be spoken?

## SUBJECT 06

### A faith that is a curtain?



#### PRESENTATION

G-d allows the Satan to test Iyov. His possessions vanish, then his children are killed by raiders. Iyov tears his garment and says: the L-rd gave, the L-rd has taken away. He does not weep.

#### THE QUESTION

*What does the trial come to verify — and what are we to think of a faith that sheds not a tear?*

#### THE ANSWER

***“The L-rd gave, and the L-rd has taken away; blessed be the name of the L-rd” (Iyov 1:21).***

The Satan here represents strict justice, rigor itself. The question he raises is formidable: is this whole religious movement not a subjective well-being, a curtain behind which man seeks to hide, a way of soothing his anxieties and perhaps of shifting his own responsibility onto something greater than himself? Is serving G-d seeking one's own salvation by telling oneself: I live in intimacy with the divine, I have nothing more to fear?

Iyov does not give in. But what is astonishing, says the Rav, is that he does not weep for his children. The text affirms that he did not sin with his words; our sages add: deep within himself, he was eaten away.

#### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

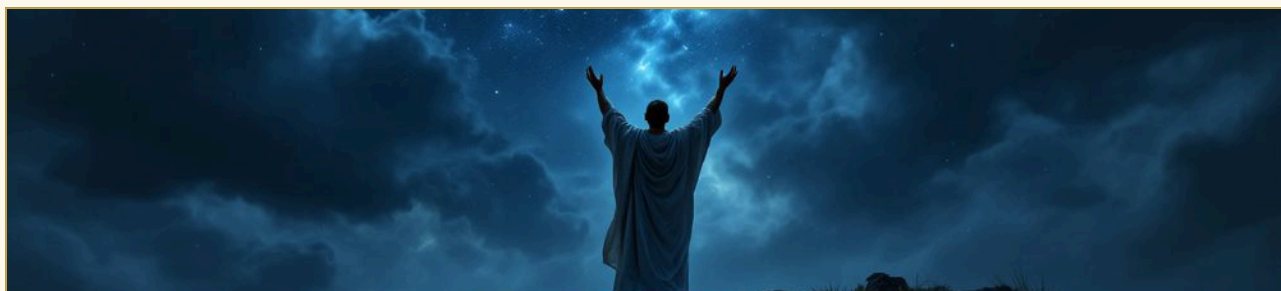
*Tearing one's garments does not mean that one has torn one's heart or that one's heart is torn.*

#### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

It is sometimes easier to say the right formula than to express what one feels. Do we have the right, in our home, to cry, to say that we are hurting? And do our religious gestures bring us closer to what we are living — or protect us from it?

## Curse, accept or challenge?

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### PRESENTATION

Covered with sores, Iyov hears his wife: how long will you hold on to your convictions? Curse G-d, and die. He answers: shall we accept good from G-d, and not evil? A pious answer, on the face of it.

### THE QUESTION

*Is G-d the source of evil as well as of good? And does the man being tested have the right to rebel?*

### THE ANSWER

***“Shall we accept good from G-d, and shall we not accept evil?” (Iyov 2:10).***

For Iyov, G-d is at once the source of good and the source of evil. That is already, says the Rav, a remnant of paganism: evil cannot emanate from the Most High, or else the L-rd would be evil, and that is impossible. He is the source of goodness. Evil is forged by man, in the way he apprehends good and manipulates it: it is man's doing.

Does one then have the right to rebel in the face of illness or misfortune? The Rav answers with an expression of the sages: chutzpah kelapei shemaya, audacity toward Heaven, can be useful. G-d likes His responsibility to be invoked; that is how Avraham approached Him: “Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?” (Bereshit 18:25).

But one must rise to the level needed to do it.

### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*The point is not to ask the question and slip away. Wait for the answer.*

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

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Sometimes we ask the question and leave — in an argument, a prayer, a difficult conversation. What question did we throw out without waiting for the answer? Do we dare, as a family, to voice our anger while staying to hear the other?

## Contempt, Iyov's true sin



### PRESENTATION

Iyov's friends defend one and the same idea: look for the cause of the trial in man, never put G-d in the dock. Iyov, for his part, believes himself faultless: it is G-d who has turned away from him.

### THE QUESTION

*What is Iyov's true sin, and what makes him change?*

### THE ANSWER

***The Rav: "He regarded himself as truly the backbone of humanity."***

There is no righteous man who never sins, say the friends; in every person, some aspect has been neglected, and the balance has been broken. Iyov does not see it.

His true sin, says the Rav, is contempt toward everyone around him. He regarded himself as the backbone of humanity, its savior, the reference, the model, and he did not judge others worthy of his attention. The friends set out to show him that there is no fault of G-d in the way He directs His universe: there is first of all man, man in his relationship with others.

It will take some thirty chapters for Iyov to correct his way of seeing. Only then does G-d reveal Himself to him and engage in dialogue. In Iyov's very name, the Rav adds, there is oyev, the enemy: self-hatred, self-contempt, which seeks reassurance elsewhere.

### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*On the contrary, one must grow, grow through study, through wisdom.*

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

One can be very pious and look down on others. Whom around us have we judged "unworthy of our attention"? Let each one say what he recently learned from someone he did not take seriously.

## The halachah that no longer breathes



### PRESENTATION

The Rav links Iyov to Tisha BeAv: we have recovered our land, but not yet the language of sharing. Breakdowns in dialogue run through society, through the generations, and through the religious world itself.

### THE QUESTION

*Why does a practice without knowledge not withstand trials — and is study without practice any better?*

### THE ANSWER

***The Rav: “Wisdom is the true fear of the L-rd.”***

We sometimes withdraw into the practice of a dried-up halachah, which breathes neither joy of living, nor will to transmit, nor a taste for community. That kind does not withstand storms, catastrophes or conflicts, and exposes us to considerable losses of substance.

The reckoning in the service of G-d is played out in the service of the other: approaching him with the utmost intelligence and wisdom. One must explain, not impose practices; knowledge must come first, and practices must be made the natural expression of ourselves, not a duty imposed from outside. Love and fear must go hand in hand.

A listener asks: and study without practice? The same failing, answers the Rav. It is a platonic love that leads nowhere, an inner tearing apart, for lack of being able to give it real expression.

### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*Study without practice means that, in reality, it is a platonic love.*

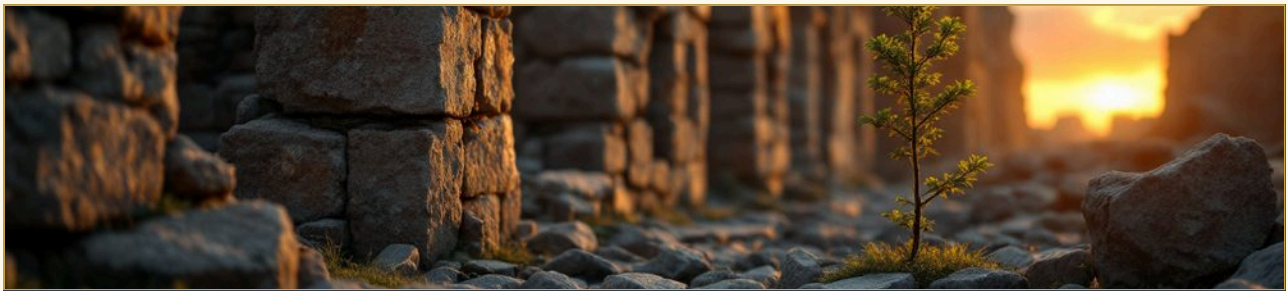
### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In our home there are things we practice without understanding them, and others we understand without practicing them. Let each one name one of each. Which one would we like to explain to our children this week, rather than impose?

## SUBJECT 10

### The Mashiach was born on Tisha BeAv

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#### PRESENTATION

Two days of the year resemble each other in fasting and differ in everything else: on Yom Kippur we plead for forgiveness; on the Ninth of Av we weep for what we have lost. Yet our sages said that it was on the Ninth of Av that the Mashiach was born.

#### THE QUESTION

*Why is the birth of the Mashiach set on the day of mourning rather than on the day of forgiveness?*

#### THE ANSWER

***Our sages: on the day the Temple was destroyed, the Mashiach was born.***

On Yom Kippur, we are aware of our sins and we beg the L-rd to grant us His forgiveness. We thus remain dependent on that forgiveness: He has to be willing to give it to us. Yet remaining in this dependence, even on G-d's forgiveness, is no guarantee for the Mashiach — because it amounts to relying on another and counting on him.

On the Ninth of Av, it is different. On that day, the people becomes aware that the problem lies within itself: that it is up to it to make the effort to overcome its weaknesses, its shortcomings, its relationship with others, with the world and with G-d. And if everything depends on me, if I alone can right the ship and set the situation straight, then the Mashiach is here.

That is why the Mashiach is born on Tisha BeAv: because on that day the people understands that it is from itself that all rebuilding can come.

#### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*On Tisha BeAv, the people became aware that it is from itself that all rebuilding can come.*

#### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

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We all have some repair we are waiting for from someone else: a gesture, an apology, a pardon. Which one have we been waiting for too long? And what would happen if we decided tonight that it also depends on us?