

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: The Book of Eikha": why the city is only "like" a widow, what it means to console her, and how a people can be exiled through an excess of servitude. The Rav refuses to end on a sad note: rebuilding, he says, depends on us.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

Table of Topics

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

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- | | |
|-----------|---|
| 01 | All the tears in three weeks |
| <hr/> | |
| 02 | The Second Temple, a mere pause |
| <hr/> | |
| 03 | A city great, not numerous |
| <hr/> | |
| 04 | Like a widow — but she is not a widow |
| <hr/> | |
| 05 | A consolation that is not a condolence |
| <hr/> | |
| 06 | The friend, the enemy, the oppressor |
| <hr/> | |
| 07 | Exiled through an excess of servitude |
| <hr/> | |
| 08 | The roads of Zion mourn |
| <hr/> | |
| 09 | The enemy within |
| <hr/> | |
| 10 | The offering that is awaited |
| <hr/> | |

SUBJECT 01

All the tears in three weeks



PRESENTATION

If a book of lamentations were written for every pogrom and a fast for every trial, not a single day of joy would remain in the year. Our sages chose to concentrate everything between the 17th of Tammuz and the 9th of Av: the period of Bein HaMetzarim.

THE QUESTION

Why gather all the mournings into one, and why is national mourning the most tragic?

THE ANSWER

“All her pursuers overtook her between the straits”, bein ha-metzarim (Eichah 1:3).

The destruction of the First Temple, says the Rav, includes all the other tragedies of our history, up to the Shoah and the ordeals we are still living through. Eichah does not weep over a single event: it weeps over all the tragedies the Jewish people has lived through, or is destined to.

National mourning is the most tragic. As long as a people is given the power to defend itself, to fulfil itself, to fight for itself, it is at war as in any war: there are victories and losses. But when it is deprived of any possibility of living in relative independence, it loses all its strength.

Today we have a State; it is not the ideal, but we have the means to defend ourselves and to show what we are capable of. If we do not manage this as we should, it is because we are also undermined from within.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

If we do not manage this as we should, it is because we are also undermined from within.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Concentrating one's tears is also a way of protecting one's days of joy. How does our family keep the memory of its losses without letting grief invade the whole year? Is there a set time in our home for remembering together?

SUBJECT 02

The Second Temple, a mere pause



PRESENTATION

When Yechezkel draws the plans of the future Sanctuary, he draws those of the Third Temple, not the Second. And when Cyrus authorizes the return from Bavel, only forty thousand go up to the Land of Israel.

THE QUESTION

If the Second Temple was only a stage, what was it meant to teach the people — and what does it teach us today?

THE ANSWER

Our sages: the building of the Second Temple was not meant to last.

It was, says the Rav, a pause, a recess in the history of Israel, a stage meant to allow the people to become aware. Only forty thousand olim returned, while the mass of the exiles remained in Bavel, when Cyrus, in a moment of clemency, had authorized the return.

Yet the Rav refuses to end on a sad note. What Yirmiyahu said two thousand years ago, our generation has lived: first the tragedy of the last war, then that smile G-d gave the Jewish people by granting it, as with the Second Temple, the possibility of rebuilding its people and its land.

Active memory means realizing this constantly and drawing the lesson from it: the Second Temple, a sketch of rebirth, did not last. What has been given back to us must not in turn remain a mere sketch — and that depends on us.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Active memory means realizing this constantly.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

A sketch can become a work or remain a rough draft. Which project of our family has remained a sketch? What depends on us, and on us alone, so that it does not stop there?

A city great, not numerous



PRESENTATION

Eichah opens with “the city rabbati am”. It is often translated: the city so full of people. The Rav corrects: rabbati does not mean numerous, but great.

THE QUESTION

What makes the greatness of a people, and where does its ruin begin?

THE ANSWER

“How she sits alone, the city great with people!” (Eichah 1:1).

Yerushalayim stood out through the greatness of its people, not its quantity. As soon as quality is measured quantitatively, says the Rav, the loss of substance is considerable.

For the people of Israel is not first of all a clan, a mass: it is made of individuals. When an individual does not build himself, in relation to himself and in relation to his family, it is like a diseased cell within the people, which little by little attacks all the others. We see our history as a whole, but starting from each person: everything depends on how he acts, how he fulfils himself, how he projects himself through others.

And the sacred principle of this construction is the relationship of husband to wife and of father to son — the very relationship that unites G-d and the community of Israel. To function well, it must be governed by love.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We are always seeing our history as a whole, but starting from each one of us.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

A family, too, is not measured by numbers. Let each one say what he himself contributes to the greatness of our home — and what he still has to build in himself so as not to weaken the others.

SUBJECT 04

Like a widow — but she is not a widow



PRESENTATION

The first verse of Eichah compares the city to a widow. The text does not say she is a widow: it says she is like a widow. The next verse adds that she weeps in the night, her tears on her cheeks.

THE QUESTION

Why compare Yerushalayim to a widow rather than to a woman alone or divorced — when her husband is not dead?

THE ANSWER

“She has become like a widow” (Eichah 1:1); “She weeps, she weeps in the night, and her tears are on her cheeks” (Eichah 1:2).

She is like a widow, and not really a widow: her husband has gone very far away, without leaving an address. That does not mean she may rebuild her life with another. She must wait, and he will appear. With a divorced woman, there has been a break, and it is best to forget; a widow, however, never stops mourning her husband. And G-d says through His prophet: do you think I will give you a bill of divorce? You can wait — I will never cast you off.

So she weeps in the night. For this people does not know how to weep: it is forbidden to weep over its fate, forbidden even to sigh. It is also a means of defense — to be always in joy, not to show that one has lost all hope. If weeping is permitted, it is at night, in secret.

And by day, one sees the trace of tears on her cheeks: the night has marked her face; it has not ravaged her spirit.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

At no moment can the Jewish people be abandoned.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There are sorrows we show only to the night, and homes where no one knows who weeps. Is that dignity, or loneliness? Who around this table carries something he tells no one — and what would it take for him to be able to say it here?

SUBJECT 05

A consolation that is not a condolence



PRESENTATION

“She has no one to console her.” The Rav pauses on this word. To console Yerushalayim is not to offer her condolences, as one does out of sympathy or respect to a family in mourning.

THE QUESTION

What is Yerushalayim's true consolation — and what, according to the Rav, does it mean to be a Zionist?

THE ANSWER

“She has no one to console her among all her lovers” (Eichah 1:2).

Her consolation is her own rebuilding: the fact that she does not want to lose the bond that ties her to her land. The gift of the land preceded the gift of the Torah, because there could be no life for the people, a reflection of the World to Come, except through a land — destined not for its earthly riches, but for its spiritual riches.

That is the object of constant prayer: three times a day, the rebuilding of Yerushalayim and the return to Zion. To be a true Zionist, says the Rav, is to make Yerushalayim one's cornerstone; there is no other Zionism. For Zion brings together the Sanhedrin, the Temple and the royal palace. These three elements are still missing, but we are on the way.

And each time we mourn the First Temple, we mourn the loss of our identity, our soil and our Sanctuary.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

To be a Zionist, a true Zionist, is to make Yerushalayim one's cornerstone.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Consoling someone is not only sympathizing: it is helping him rebuild. Who around us is waiting less for our words than for our help to get back on his feet? And what “cornerstone” do we give our own home?

SUBJECT 06

The friend, the enemy, the oppressor



PRESENTATION

“All her friends have betrayed her; they have become her enemies.” Then: “Her oppressors have become the leaders.” Eichah uses several words for the adversary, and the Rav carefully distinguishes them.

THE QUESTION

What is the difference between the oyeve and the tzar, and what happens when the one becomes the other?

THE ANSWER

“Her oppressors have become the leaders, her enemies are at ease” (Eichah 1:5).

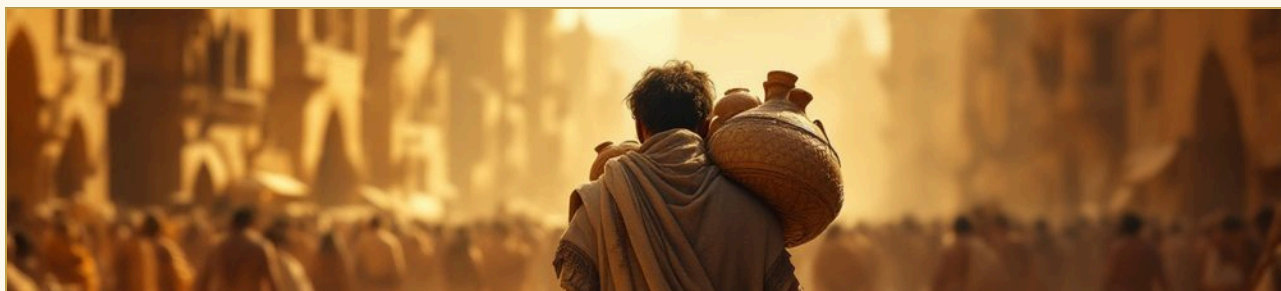
Ohev, the one who loves, and oyeve, the enemy: a yud and a hei apart. The oyeve is an enemy with whom one can live on good terms: he hates us, but we do business with him, we keep up good neighborly relations; deep down, he does not love us. The tzar, the oppressor, declares his hatred openly. And those who called themselves our friends, when it came time to prove their love, often turned out to be oyevim: a love of self-interest, a tolerance, rather than true love.

The tragedy begins when the oyevim become tzarim, and they are the ones who occupy the positions of command. Where, asks the Rav, are the men who were once chosen because they were valiant, G-d-fearing, hating gain? In their place, we find those who campaign on a slogan.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There are friendships that last only as long as they pay. Can we recognize, among our relationships, those that would withstand a trial? And we ourselves — for whom would we be a true friend on the day it costs something?

Exiled through an excess of servitude



PRESENTATION

“Yehudah has gone into exile through affliction and through excessive servitude; she dwells among the nations and finds no rest.” The Rav reads these two causes differently from what one would expect.

THE QUESTION

What poverty and what servitude is Yirmiyahu speaking of — and how can generosity become servility?

THE ANSWER

“Yehudah has gone into exile through affliction and excessive servitude”, *me-oni u-me-rov avodah* (Eichah 1:3).

There is material poverty, but also poverty of spirit. One need only open one's eyes to see how hatred spreads within the people between parties, positions and differing views — and this leaves us exposed to those who persecute us.

As for the excess of servitude: we wanted to please everyone, to show too great an openness, to tolerate, to give, to serve. We gave too much, we paid with ourselves, and this generosity of spirit turned out to be servility. In the realm of the spirit, we should have asserted our own values; we preferred to enter into the thinking of others.

The exiles acquired a taste for their status as exiles. Bein HaMetzarim is that too: being prisoner of a reading of the Torah that one has tried to adapt in order to find one's place among the nations. Transmitting the message, yes; granting oneself the freedom to adjust it, no.

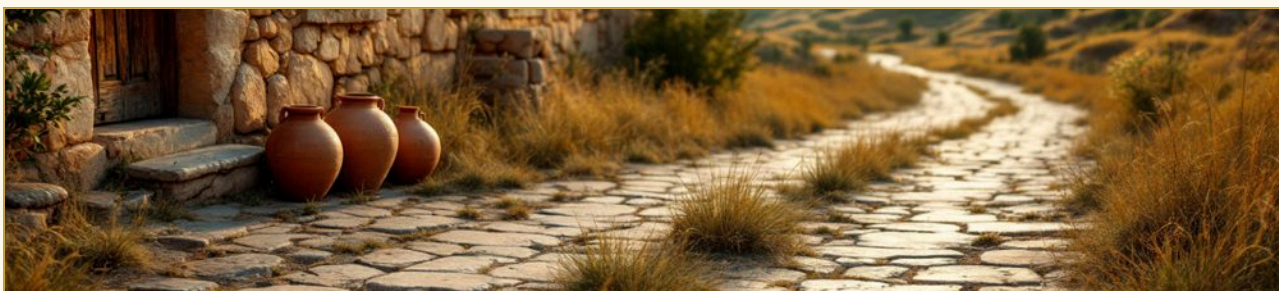
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We preferred to enter into the thinking of the other nations, and we have paid the bill for it.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There is a generosity that elevates and a generosity that diminishes the one who gives. To whom do we give in order to be loved rather than out of kindness? And what should we stop conceding this year so as to remain faithful to who we are?

The roads of Zion mourn



PRESENTATION

“The roads of Zion mourn, for none come to the festivals.” Three times a year, people went up to Yerushalayim. The Rav recalls why — and what is lost when those roads empty.

THE QUESTION

Why was the pilgrimage vital, and what is a practice worth if it leads toward no one?

THE ANSWER

“The roads of Zion mourn, for none come to the festivals” (Eichah 1:4); Mishnah Ta'anit 4:8.

People went up for the three festivals to replenish themselves spiritually, to make new contacts, to gather around the spiritual leaders of the people. They went from one house of study to another to hear a master, an educator, a judge: the courts sat at the city gates, guardians of the city. It was no holiday outing.

For a halachah observed with the strictest rigor but lived in withdrawal is worth nothing if it does not project me toward the other: it is another form of idolatry. I have shut myself up in practices that turn me neither toward my neighbor, nor toward my society, nor toward my people.

The great concern of the city's guardians was also the future. Yom Kippur and the 15th of Av were the happiest days of the year: the young women went out, dressed in borrowed clothes, to meet their suitors. The future had to be built on new families.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

If this halachah does not project me toward the other, it is worth nothing.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Our festivals too can become deserted roads. At the next festival, whom could we go to see, invite or listen to, so that it takes us beyond our limits? And which practice in our home would benefit from opening up to others?

SUBJECT 09

The enemy within



PRESENTATION

Eichah accuses the persecutors, but the Rav reads further: Israel knows she is not without blemish in this exile. And at the end of the lecture, he is asked how one can speak of unity when the adversary is within the people itself.

THE QUESTION

If the enemy is within, where can salvation come from?

THE ANSWER

“Yerushalayim remembered, in the days of her affliction, all the treasures she had of old” (Eichah 1:7).

Israel neglected her values, her landmarks, her standards; she wanted to emancipate herself like the other nations. More serious still: her children were manipulated. When children no longer receive an education worthy of their parents, the people's future is compromised. And if the enemy is within, who will come to help from outside?

What remains as a lifeline is to cleave to one's own history: let Yerushalayim remember, in her days of poverty, the treasures she possessed.

As for unity, the Rav does not idealize it: we will never be a people cast from a single mold; we were born of twelve tribes. But there are common denominators that cannot be lost from sight: the Torah, the land and the people. And the key, he says, lies in education.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We will never be a people cast from a single mold, all of one piece. We were formed from twelve tribes.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

A family is not cast from a single mold either. What are our “common denominators”, what we never want to lose despite our differences? Let each one name one, and say what he does to pass it on.

SUBJECT 10

The offering that is awaited



PRESENTATION

The lecture ends with a prayer: “Bring us back to You, O L-rd, and we shall return; renew our days as of old.” Our forebears dreamed of Yerushalayim and its Sanctuary. But what Sanctuary are they hoping for?

THE QUESTION

What does it mean today to pray for the return of the Sanctuary and its offerings?

THE ANSWER

“Bring us back to You, O L-rd, and we shall return; renew our days as of old” (Eichah 5:21).

The Rav says it plainly: the hoped-for Sanctuary is not first of all a place of animal sacrifices. What man must offer there is his own animality, everything that diminishes him, destroys him, gnaws at him from within, so as to bring out in himself the tzelem Elokim, the image of G-d.

That is the meaning of the return being asked for: to turn back upon ourselves, to renew our days, our way of living, our way of rethinking ourselves. Our forebears dreamed of this Yerushalayim, and through their prayers they continue to seek to recover this Sanctuary.

We must not, he adds, lose the chance to breathe new life into our people and our values.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Man tries to sacrifice his animality, everything that diminishes him, so as to bring out the image of G-d that matters within us.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each of us carries something that “gnaws at him from within”: anger, envy, laziness. Which trait would we like to offer up this year, to make more room for the best in us? And how can the family help us do it?