

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 Iyov (Job)": why the righteous suffer, what the explanations of Iyov's friends are worth, and what G-d finally answers him. The remedy, says the Rav, comes down to one gesture: holding out one's hand.



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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Birth pangs



PRESENTATION

As a child, the Rav would stay after the service with his grandfather to read a few chapters of Iyov as the Ninth of Av approached. The book raises the question of *tzaddik ve-ra lo*: why does the righteous man suffer?

THE QUESTION

Why read Iyov on Tisha BeAv, and how should one look at a crisis?

THE ANSWER

The sages' question: *tzaddik ve-ra lo* — a righteous man, and evil befalls him.

Iyov raises the problem of human suffering, and by extension that of the Jewish people. That is why reading it was recommended as a source of reflection on the tribulations that lie at the root of the Ninth of Av, and that have continued over time.

Whenever there is a change, a crisis, a new direction, a reinvention, there are birth pangs. These pangs take tragic forms; our generation is barely recovering from the tragedy of the last war. Then the question of the eclipse of G-d arises.

But we must know, the Rav concludes, that every crisis prepares a new birth. The passage from one era to another demands new structures and a new adaptation, even among our rulers and our judges.

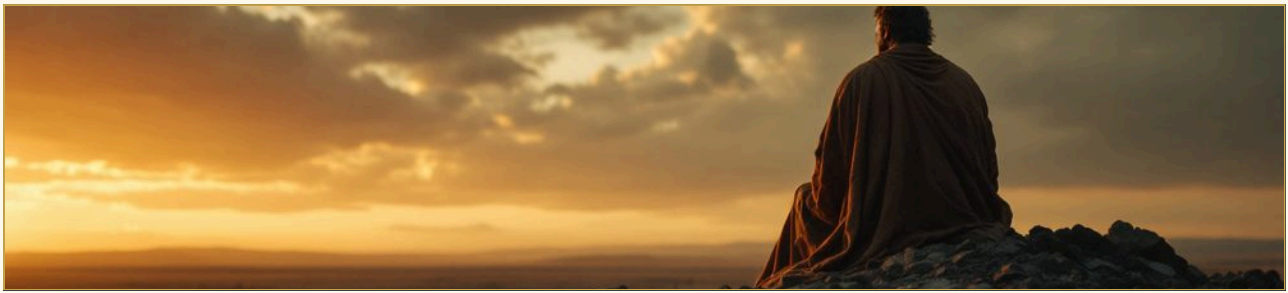
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Whenever there are crises, it is because they are preparing a new birth.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Every family goes through crises: a move, an illness, a departure. Thinking back on one of them, can we say what it gave birth to? And which one are we perhaps going through right now without yet seeing its fruit?

Did Iyov exist?



PRESENTATION

Our sages propose some ten different eras in which to place Iyov: the time of Avraham, that of the spies, that of Achashverosh... One of them goes further: Iyov never existed; it was a parable.

THE QUESTION

What difference does it make to the reader that Iyov belongs to every era — or to none?

THE ANSWER

“Iyov never existed and was never created; he was only a parable” (Bava Batra 15a).

One can understand linking him to Avraham: tested ten times, he receives the promise of descendants through Yitzchak, then the command to offer him up as a burnt offering. The horizons close. But to say that Iyov belongs to every era is to say that he belongs to none.

The Rav tells a listener: Iyov is a model of being. Mind you, Iyov is you, it is me, it is the other; one must not focus on one particular Iyov in history. This Iyov of misfortune dwells in all of us, at different levels. Those who lived through the tragedy of our century were all haunted by his questions.

But one cannot stop there: one observes a mourning, and from that mourning one must rise again. Otherwise, it is not just one death that affects us, but the death of several generations.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Iyov is you, it is me, it is the other.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

If Iyov is each of us, what is the question of Iyov that we carry — the “why me” we have never dared say at the table? Can we ask it together, without rushing to answer it?

SUBJECT 03

Three sources of misfortune



PRESENTATION

Even before opening the book, the Rav recalls a distinction of the Rambam. Not all misfortunes are alike, and the question “why me?” does not arise in the same way for each.

THE QUESTION

What are the three sources of misfortune, and which one truly involves us?

THE ANSWER

The Rambam distinguishes three kinds of evils that befall man.

First there is what does not depend on us: a child born with a deformity, an earthquake, a tsunami, an accident. It is not our fault, and yet it raises many questions.

Then there are historical conditions, entirely independent of our will, to which we are subjected and which deprive us of everything we had hoped for. The society in which we live can oppress us and deprive us of what we might have dreamed of.

Finally there is man who abuses his freedom in one way or another and suffers the consequences — and sometimes it is not he who suffers them, but his descendants. The book of Iyov, says the Rav, touches on all three: it has a tragic aspect, an idealistic aspect and a prophetic dimension.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Faced with a difficulty, we often mix up these three sources. Let us take a recent trial in the family: what depended on no one, what came from circumstances, and what part, honestly, was in our hands?

SUBJECT 04

The Satan, one messenger among others



PRESENTATION

On the day the “sons of G-d” come to present themselves before the L-rd, the Satan comes among them. A listener is surprised: why would G-d need to send such a force to cast doubt on Iyov's righteousness?

THE QUESTION

Who is the Satan, and why does he have a place among G-d's messengers?

THE ANSWER

“One day the sons of G-d came to present themselves before the L-rd, and the Satan also came among them” (Iyov 1:6).

These “sons of G-d” are His messengers: the virtues embodied by each, which in a sense govern creation through their potential, their ideas, their functions. The Satan is one of them. His name comes from satah, to deviate, to go around. Yet sometimes one must use cunning to avoid danger; the Satan has his role even in man's impulses.

He is also the one who haunts our minds, calls us into question, gnaws at us from within — and sometimes confirms us in what we believe. But nothing is free: he expects something in return.

And he is not so far away, answers the Rav: the Satan is sometimes your next-door neighbor; he lives among us. It can be the son, the wife, the husband: the one who takes the opposite view of everything and calls everything into question. Iyov's wife, who urges him to renounce G-d, becomes his accomplice. One must be aware of it.

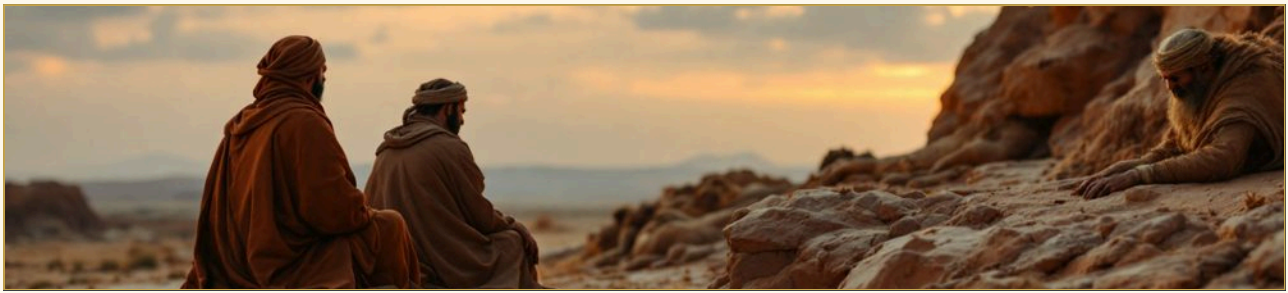
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Know that the Satan lives among us, with us.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In every home there is a voice that disputes everything. Is it always an obstacle, or does it sometimes force us to think better? How can we tell apart, in our home, the contradiction that helps us grow from the one that gnaws away?

Consoling without speaking



PRESENTATION

From Iyov, our sages learned some of the laws of mourning. Then come three visitors, whom the text calls his re'im. The Rav pauses on this word, and on the silence that precedes their speeches.

THE QUESTION

How should one stand beside someone who is suffering — and who truly is our neighbor?

THE ANSWER

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Vayikra 19:18); “You shall love the stranger” (Devarim 10:19).

The mourner recites the blessing of the true Judge standing: one rises to accept the verdict, and to affirm that one will rise again from this mourning. Then one tears one's garment. But what leaves us wanting with Iyov is that he shares his pain with no one.

There are three words for a friend: yedid, the beloved; chaver, the companion; and re'a, the neighbor. The Torah does not ask us to love our chaver: it says to love our re'a, and to love the stranger. The neighbor is other than you; love is proven when one loves someone different, not someone who resembles us. Iyov had kept only three friends — enough to make one say: save me from my friends.

Yet at first they are silent. One does not try to console a man full of bitterness, nor to argue with him: one must let him speak; it is for him to address you first.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Love is proven when we are inclined to love someone different, not someone who resembles me.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Faced with a loved one's pain, we often want to speak too quickly. When did we know simply how to be there, in silence? And who, different from us, would need us this week to love him as a “neighbor”?

Three friends, three explanations



PRESENTATION

After the silence, the three friends speak. Eliphaz, Tzofar, Bildad: each brings an explanation of misfortune, and the Rav presents them as three great tendencies of religious thought.

THE QUESTION

What are the theses of the three friends — and which one contains a sound idea?

THE ANSWER

“Remember, then: what innocent man ever perished?” — Eliphaz to Iyov (Iyov 4:7).

Eliphaz: if misfortune strikes us, we are responsible for it; we are atoning for our sins or those of our predecessors. Stop proclaiming your innocence, examine your deeds and change direction. Tzofar: G-d tests only the righteous, to raise them to a higher level; every misfortune is in man's interest. Bildad: there is no point questioning how the world is run; G-d is the Master; it is for us to accept our fate while remaining faithful to Him.

There is a sound idea in Eliphaz, which the Rambam takes up: to settle into the assurance of one's own perfection, to say “I have done nothing, I do not deserve this”, to refuse to question oneself and to look for how to come out of the trial, is a sin of pride.

Iyov falls into it when he lists what he used to be: I who lived by justice and charity, respected and loved by all, here I am reduced to this. The loss of recognition makes him bitter.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

When something goes wrong, everyone has his “thesis”: it's your fault, it's for your own good, let's not talk about it. Which one do we use most often at home? And have we ever served it to someone who mainly needed to be listened to?

SUBJECT 07

Elihu, the youngest



PRESENTATION

A fourth man steps in, younger than the others: Elihu. He agrees in part with each of the three friends, but he adds an element no one had seen.

THE QUESTION

What does Elihu bring that the others had not said?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: Iyov “does not realize that his life itself is a kindness”.

Elihu brings everything together. But his last word is aimed at Iyov himself: this man regards himself as a true interlocutor of G-d, he wants to address the Judge of all the earth, and he does not realize that his life itself is a kindness, a blessing in itself.

Why then does he want to enter into the twists and turns of divine justice, and to put G-d in the dock at all costs? That is audacious, says the Rav.

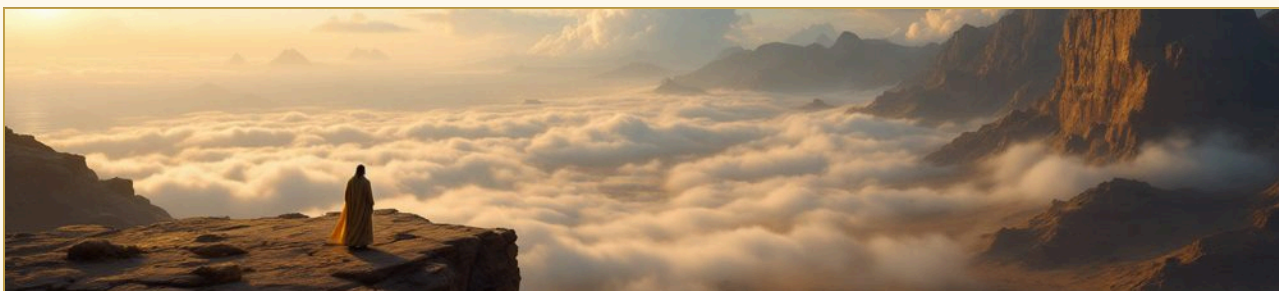
Iyov has not yet found his real place, his real function. He reduces G-d to the function of a judge, almost to a social function, when he should rather be examining his own obligations toward G-d, in whatever condition he may be.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We sometimes keep a careful tally of what we lack. Tonight, let each one name three things in his life that are simply a kindness, unearned. What would change if we started from there?

SUBJECT 08

Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?



PRESENTATION

Iyov demanded that G-d break His silence. When G-d finally speaks, He does not begin with Iyov, but with his friends.

THE QUESTION

What does G-d answer Iyov — and why does He first disavow his friends?

THE ANSWER

“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?” (Iyov 38:4).

G-d begins by disavowing Eliphaz and his companions: they judged Iyov very badly. He should have been the object neither of their accusations nor of their suspicions; it was not for them to pass judgment on his faith.

Then He answers Iyov. To understand G-d's relationship with His creation, one would first have to understand creation itself. Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Did you understand the structures I gave My world? Do you understand them today? All you lack is justice: you would like to grasp it, and become yourself the guarantor of My justice.

The Rambam explains it: your ways are not My ways. You are always focused on the individual, on the detail; I govern the entire universe, with other parameters. We cannot reduce G-d to our human condition.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We cannot reduce G-d to our human condition.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We often judge a situation from our own point of view alone. Think of a family decision that seemed unfair to us: might it have another meaning seen from higher up, for the family as a whole? And when did we judge another's faith or conduct too quickly?

Holding out one's hand



PRESENTATION

At the end of the book, the L-rd gives Iyov back twice everything he had. But the verse specifies when: when Iyov prayed for his friends — the very ones who had accused him.

THE QUESTION

Why does deliverance come when Iyov prays for others, and what is the remedy for suffering?

THE ANSWER

“The L-rd restored Iyov's fortunes when he prayed for his friends” (Iyov 42:10); Berachot 5b.

We must not think that G-d rejoices in the suffering of the righteous. He weeps as much as man; He is in exile with him. What He is waiting for is for man to hold out his hand to his neighbor.

The Talmud tells it: one master visits another who is sick and asks him: are your sufferings dear to you? Neither they nor their reward, answers the other. Then, the text says simply, he holds out his hand and raises him up. Holding out one's hand to the afflicted, to the one who has lost everything; that is the way to console and to remedy the ills of society.

That is why Iyov is read on the Ninth of Av. On that day, we lost our Sanctuary and forced G-d into exile with us. We did not know how to give our faith its true dimension; we too often reduced it to our own person and our own interests, without kindness, without a hand held out.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

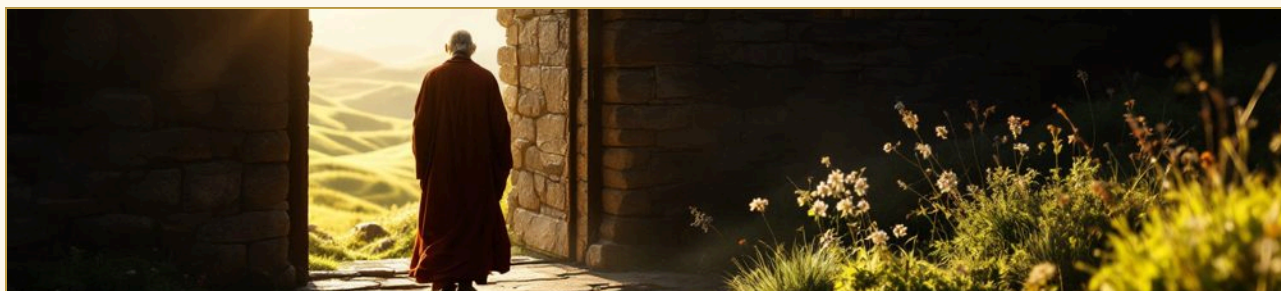
Holding out one's hand to the other, showing this love toward the other, is a way of expressing that love of G-d.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The Talmud's remedy comes down to one gesture: holding out a hand. Who around us has “fallen” this year and is waiting to be raised up? Let each one choose a person and a concrete gesture for the coming week.

SUBJECT 10

The righteous man who is no longer of his time



PRESENTATION

Tzaddik ve-ra lo, the righteous man who suffers: the Rav cites an unexpected definition, which speaks neither of sin nor of trial, but of the passing of time. And Iyov, at the end, says he has at last “seen”.

THE QUESTION

How can a righteous man suffer from no longer being of his time — and what does “now my eye sees You” mean?

THE ANSWER

“I had heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You” (Iyov 42:5).

A righteous man who suffers is a righteous man who is no longer of his time: he goes on living in the past, he does not see that the world is moving forward, that one should replenish oneself and adapt to the new structures, without clinging at all costs to the language of the past as the only valid one. The Torah indeed says to turn to the judge “who will be in those days” (Devarim 17:9): it does not say that the past generation was better.

Just as a person develops from childhood through crises, a people must know how to overcome its own without getting bogged down. Avraham said: I am dust and ashes — and it is from those ashes that one rebuilds oneself.

Iyov thus ends: until now I heard You through speeches, sermons, recipes for faith; now I see You, I realize Your presence. That is what Avraham had attained: a service out of love, which expected nothing and pleaded for justice for others, never for himself.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Now I see You, now I realize Your presence.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each generation has its language. Which phrase, which habit of the house do we repeat because “it has always been done that way”? Parents and children: let each one say what he would like the other to understand about “his time”.