

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

BESHALACH

10 Questions for the Shabbat Table

Ten questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Beshalach: Have We Really Left Egypt?”: a parasha that opens
with a cry of distress, a people of many tendencies, the sea that
parts only before Yosef's coffin — and the only question that
matters: who brought us out?



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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Themes for reflection and questions to share around the table of Parashat Beshalach

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SUBJECT 01

Did We Truly Leave Egypt?



PRESENTATION

The Exodus from Egypt is the people's birthday: without it, says the Rav, we would have no anniversary. And yet every year we must say three words again at the Seder table — otherwise we have not fulfilled our obligation.

THE QUESTION

Why must the Exodus still be declared every year with three words — and what does the last one say?

THE ANSWER

“Whoever has not said these three things on Pesach has not fulfilled his obligation: Pesach, matzah and maror” (Mishnah Pesachim 10:5).

The Exodus from Egypt is the exodus from all exiles. The day we came out is the day of our birth; the day the Torah was given, that of our coming of age; the day of our home in Israel, the day we sealed a covenant with our land. But behind each of these days there is work going on in the background.

Hence the three words. Pesach is the leap — and this leap obeys no pure logic. Matzah is what we take upon ourselves: preventing the dough from rising, with a time limit not to be exceeded. And there is maror: the harsh trials tied to this whole process of liberation, the obstacles of life that keep coming back and making us believe that, after all, Egypt was better.

Whoever does not declare these three movements of the self in the effort of its liberation has not yet completed his journey. And each person, in deciding to leave, had his own reason for doing so. Hence the Rav's question: have we left Egypt completely?

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Nothing is achieved without sustained trials that must be gone through at all costs; otherwise one risks, sadly, losing one's footing.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There is always an Egypt that seems, from afar, more comfortable than the march under way. Let each person say which one is his: a habit, a job, a silence. And what maror have we refused to name this year?

Four Ways of Leaving Egypt



PRESENTATION

G-d had announced the Exodus from Egypt. But within the people leaving that day, the Rav distinguishes several tendencies, each with its own reason for leaving — or for not wanting to leave.

THE QUESTION

How many different reasons were there for leaving Egypt that day — and which would be ours?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “We are confronted with these tendencies within the people.”

First there is the departure Pharaoh grants: under pressure from G-d, he agrees to let this people go. This is a fact of our whole history: we began the journey toward the land only with Pharaoh's consent, then with that of Cyrus, and as for the State of Israel, without the Balfour Declaration we would not be where we are today.

Then there are those who, deep down, would not want to leave Egypt. What they would have wished, at most, is that the Egyptians be sent out of Egypt and they be left there: that they be freed from the Egyptians, but not torn away from Egypt.

These, then, are the object of an expulsion, for without it they would not leave: it is a gerush, as one speaks of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. And finally there is the tendency that remained faithful to the patriarchs, that seeks to fulfill the wish of the fathers, that never stopped praying, and that holds that its full and complete Jewish identity can only be realized in the land of Israel.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Such is the history G-d wants for us: to associate the peoples with His will to settle the Jewish people in its land.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Of these tendencies, several leave because they are pushed, only one because it wants to. To which does each of us belong in his Jewish life? And what in our home is still a matter of expulsion rather than desire?

“And It Came to Pass”: Why a Word of Woe?



PRESENTATION

The parasha opens with vayehi, “and it came to pass.” The Rav hears in it a double cry of distress. Elsewhere, the same verb gives vehayah, “and it shall be,” and that is good news. The story of the Exodus chooses the first.

THE QUESTION

Why does the story of the greatest deliverance in our history open with a word of distress?

THE ANSWER

“And it came to pass (vayehi), when Pharaoh sent the people out” (Shemot 13:17); Ibn Ezra: the past no longer exists, the future is not yet here, and the present is but the blink of an eye.

In Hebrew, the verb “to be” is the only way of realizing oneself in the world. We have no verb “to have,” because we possess nothing; but when we invest in our being, it is a long-term investment, through our children and grandchildren. Now this verb can be torn apart: vayehi, it was; vehayah, it shall be.

Ibn Ezra says it: the past no longer exists, the future is still to come, and the present escapes me. My life is therefore in motion — but I hold it by the acts I perform: each act has its time, it marks its time, it takes a measure of time. When everything is still in the project stage, the story can say: it shall be.

And vehayah is the word that announces that your children will ask you. That children should question their fathers and not be indifferent to their message, their history, their heritage, their legacy: that is wonderful.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

When the whole future has already become a museum piece, it lies in the past: woe for the past, woe for the future.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We sometimes tell our history like a museum: dates, heroes, photos. What have we passed on this year that still prompts a child's question? And what should we say differently so that it is spoken in the future tense?

It Was Not Pharaoh Who Sent the People Out



PRESENTATION

The verse says: “when Pharaoh sent the people out.” Pharaoh is named, Pharaoh acts, Pharaoh opens the door. The Rav sees here the other face of the cry of distress in vayehei.

THE QUESTION

If we hold Pharaoh to be the one who brought us out, what have we never left?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “Pharaoh is a man, but it is not Pharaoh who sent the people out.”

It is G-d who sent the people out. Only, we thought it was the other: that without the Balfour Declaration there would have been nothing, that without Cyrus there would have been nothing. And this presence that came to inscribe itself in the unfolding of Jewish history, discreet but present, active — we ignored it.

So we will always fear Pharaoh, remain in his debt. It will take a long journey through the desert to come out of exile: forty years of history. And these forty years, when accompanied by G-d, remain forty; when left to man, they can be multiplied by ten.

The four hundred years of Egypt were decided by G-d; and it is He who shortened that time to ensure the people's survival.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

So we will always fear Pharaoh. We have not left Egypt.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We owe much to human hands, and it is right to acknowledge it. But to whom have we felt so indebted that we no longer dare displease him? And what has that made us keep silent about?

Pointing the Way, or Leading by the Hand



PRESENTATION

The direct route to the land exists: one need only go up the coast, through the land of the Philistines. G-d does not take it. And the text does not say that He made them walk: it says He did not lead them that way.

THE QUESTION

What is the difference between showing the way and leading by the hand — and why was the second needed here?

THE ANSWER

“G-d did not lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines” (Shemot 13:17); “Let them give thanks to the L-rd for His kindness... let them exalt Him in the assembly of the people and praise Him in the council of the elders” (Tehillim 107:8, 32).

Four must give thanks: one who recovers from illness, one who has crossed the seas, one who has escaped a danger, one who has come out of captivity. For all of them it is said that they shall thank the L-rd for His kindness. But for those who cross the seas, it adds: let them exalt Him in the assembly and among the sages. Why this addition?

Because there are two ways of being helped. On dry land, one may not know one's way; but let someone point it out to me, and I will continue by my own means. At sea, no: you may put a compass in my hand, but facing torrential waves I do not control, unless I am assisted at every moment by a hand that guides me, I will not set out.

So G-d did not want simply to point out the way to them: they were not to feel that they had achieved this by themselves. Knowing His people, He wanted to forge its identity through the harsh trials of the desert, so that it would not pack its bags at the first difficulties and return to its land of exile.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

He must continue on his way because he is assisted by an invisible presence.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We prefer to be shown the way: it leaves us the pride of arriving on our own. Where have we refused to be led, when we were on the open sea? And to whom did we give a map, when we should have given a hand?

Why Did Yosef Make His Brothers Swear, and Not His Sons?



PRESENTATION

At the moment of departure, everyone is counting the gold and silver carried out of Egypt. Moshe has only one concern: to take Yosef's bones. Now Yosef had made his brothers swear — and not his own children, which would have been safer.

THE QUESTION

Why does Yosef entrust his return to his brothers, the very ones who had sold him?

THE ANSWER

“Moshe took with him the bones (atzmot) of Yosef, for he had made the children of Israel swear” (Shemot 13:19).

First, because it was he who had brought them down. It was he who wanted to bind his fate to theirs, he who achieved the unity of the first family unit. It brought him suffering, and he did not hold it against his brothers: on the contrary, he reassured them by telling them he had been sold only to serve them better, for all this was part of a historical agenda beyond our grasp.

Second, because of the word. Atzmot is translated as bones, but it is atzmut: Yosef's essence, the essence deposited in each of us that allows us to reach other values, to discover them, to savor them. The fathers did not leave us a separate Torah, but exemplary lines of conduct, an unshakable morality, an unwavering faith. That is why we invoke the G-d of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, and not “the G-d of Moshe.”

And Moshe is associated with Yosef: both served Pharaoh and the Jewish people. One at the beginning of the exile, the other at its end.

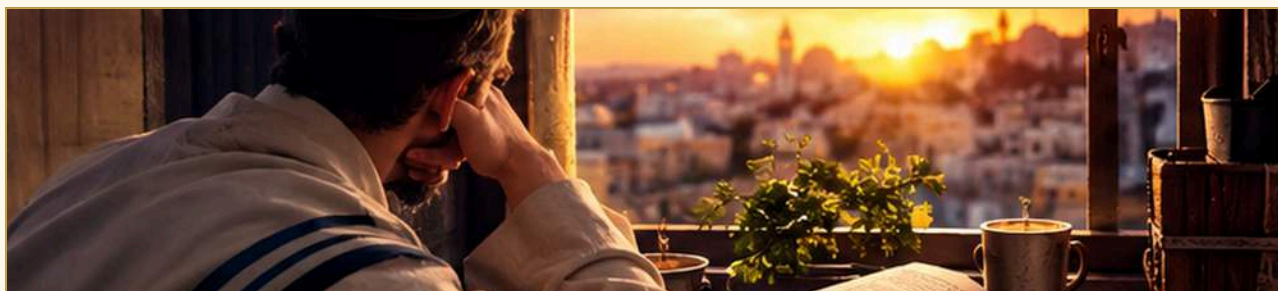
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We are not the only ones making our history; we take part in it to a certain extent.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

At times of departure, each person decides what to take. What have we carried from one stage of our life to the next: possessions, grudges, or an essence? And to whom do we still owe having been carried?

Why Does the Sea Split Before Yosef?



PRESENTATION

Without Yosef, says the Rav, the people would not have gone beyond the edge of the sea. For at first the sea refuses to obey Moshe: I too, it says, received a divine command at creation, to follow my course. The argument ends when it sees Yosef's coffin.

THE QUESTION

What was in that coffin that obtained from the sea what the command given to Moshe could not?

THE ANSWER

“The sea saw and fled” (Tehillim 114:3); “He left his garment in her hand, fled and went outside” (Bereshit 39:12).

The sea flees because it recognizes a precedent: it is what Yosef had done before Potiphar's wife, who had set her eyes on him and wanted him to be truly hers. He left his garment — that is, what was at his service — and fled outside.

This flight outside is the will to keep the essence of the patriarchs intact, and to cast off the garment one had agreed to share with the nations. For we share many garments with them.

But at these limits, we belong to another order of being, another order of reality in history: no longer the natural course of things, but the supernatural course. And the sea, which has obeyed the natural course since creation, gives way before the one who stepped out of it.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We have garments we share with the nations, and that is very well; but there are limits.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We all wear garments shared with the world around us, and that is legitimate. Where is the limit for each of us, the point beyond which one must leave the garment and go out? Did we cross it this year without seeing it?

A Dough That Had Not Risen



PRESENTATION

The text speaks of the people without defining it: neither “My people” nor “your people” — the people. And with it goes up a “mixed multitude,” the *erev rav*. The Rav connects these two facts to a detail: the dough each person carried out of Egypt.

THE QUESTION

What distinguishes those whose dough was ready from those who left with a dough that had not risen?

THE ANSWER

“A mixed multitude (*erev rav*) went up with them as well” (Shemot 12:38).

When a people is undefined, it is because it is made up of different tendencies, held together by an artificial bond, in which each one waits for his favorable moment to let his true desires, his true interests, burst out.

Among them, some had prepared their matzot: they had been told to accompany the paschal lamb with matzot, they already knew, and their dough was ready. But one fringe leaves Egypt last, with a dough that was not sufficiently ready: that is the *erev rav*. All are willing to share the same departure for the moment — all the more since they have no choice: antisemitism is there and Pharaoh is pressing them to leave the land.

That is why G-d wants to accompany them, rather than point them to the short route: for a people that has not yet completely left Egypt, the way of the Philistines is too close. They would soon go back.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is not a homogeneous people, but a people made up of entirely different ideas, of diverse beliefs.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

A family too sometimes sets out together with doughs more or less ready. In which common decision did we go along without really being ready? How can we accompany those who walk with us without sharing our conviction?

“Lest the People Regret”



PRESENTATION

The reason given for the detour is troubling: lest the people change its mind on seeing war and return to Egypt. Now the word used, *yinachem*, is the very word for the consolation offered to mourners.

THE QUESTION

What, then, is consoling — and why does G-d lead the people toward the sea rather than by the direct route?

THE ANSWER

“Lest the people regret (*pen yinachem*) when they see war, and return to Egypt” (Shemot 13:17).

What is consolation? We are not quite sure. One can imagine a mother or a father consoling their child. But someone who comes to offer condolences — that is not it: that is politeness.

To console is to tell the one who has been struck that he is accompanied, guided, assisted: what he is going through is a hard trial in the course of life, and he must place himself in another perspective, where he is no longer the actor but lets himself be carried by the event toward other horizons. Receiving this from someone outside is comforting; telling it to oneself lends itself to confusion.

And if the L-rd turns the people aside toward the Sea of Reeds, it is to complete its birth. As with a child's coming into the world, the true birth of the Jewish people is not the Exodus from Egypt.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

That is the true birth of the Jewish people: not at the moment of the Exodus from Egypt, but at the moment of the crossing of the sea.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We all know how to explain to ourselves why we gave up. What decision did we abandon this year with a good reason found after the fact? And who at this table would need to hear a consolation coming from someone other than himself?

SUBJECT 10

A Table on a Single Leg



PRESENTATION

After the lecture, a participant objects: Moshe too cast off his princely garment to leave Pharaoh's house. Why does the sea not part before him, but before Yosef's coffin?

THE QUESTION

What does Yosef have that Moshe, the greatest of the prophets, does not?

THE ANSWER

Talmud, Berachot 32a: Moshe pleads that if a three-legged seat could not stand before the divine anger, all the more so a seat with a single leg.

The Rav recalls Moshe's prayer after the golden calf. G-d makes him a tempting proposal: let us erase this rough draft and make a people anew from you. Moshe answers: if until now a table on three legs has not stood, how do You expect a table to stand for long on a single leg?

For the fathers are not of the same constitution as the sons. The father is the essence of several children; his branches extend through these children, who do not resemble one another. One can therefore never put the father and the children on the same level. Moshe, in relation to the fathers, is only a son.

Yosef, for his part, is considered the joint — and the break — between the patriarchs on one side and the children on the other: that is why the book of Bereshit ends with him. And it is in this capacity that he is entitled to two tribes within Israel, and not just one.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The father is the essence of several children, and the father's branches extend through these children.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We sometimes expect a single child to carry everything the parents wanted: that is a table on a single leg. What does each of us receive from his parents that his brothers and sisters did not receive in the same way?