

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

BERESHIT

12 Questions to Ask at the Shabbat Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Bereshit: The Beginning of Creation”: what the very idea of a
beginning changes, why the Torah opens with a bet, and why G-d
wanted an unfinished world. All the way to Shabbat, sanctified for
all humanity.



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Themes for reflection and questions to share around the Bereshit table

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SUBJECT 01

A beginning, and therefore a purpose



PRESENTATION

The Rav opens the study of Bereshit with a refusal: he will discuss neither the age of the world nor how the universe was made. The text says six days, and that is enough. What matters is contained in a single word: bereshit, “in the beginning”.

THE QUESTION

Why does Jewish faith rest first of all on the idea that there was a beginning — even before belief in G-d?

THE ANSWER

“Bereshit bara Elokim” (Bereshit 1:1): to the reshít, the beginning, corresponds a tachlit, a purpose.

The whole foundation of Jewish faith rests on this principle. If we say the world is the fruit of chance and of an evolution that began with a big bang we can scarcely analyse, then we ourselves are the fruit of a chance we do not control, determined by the laws of nature with no way out of them.

That is why the Torah does not ask us to believe in G-d as long as we have not accepted the principle of a beginning. If there is a beginning, there is a will, there is free choice. When I decide to do something, I assert my will and take on my responsibilities; as a mere link in a chain of events I do not control, I never could.

The Rav does not, for all that, reject evolution: it can only be conceived within this creation, not in its place.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

To say there is a reshít is to say there is a tachlit, that there is indeed a purpose: history has a meaning.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What in our family life had a true, deliberate beginning — a marriage, a move, a decision? And toward what purpose does that beginning still commit us today?

SUBJECT 02

Why does the book not begin with the first letter?



PRESENTATION

The first word of the Torah opens with a bet, the second letter of the alphabet. The aleph is that turning propeller which expresses the very movement of creation. And yet every book begins on page bet.

THE QUESTION

If the aleph speaks of unity, why does the account of the beginning open with the letter of two — and what would be lost by starting with one?

THE ANSWER

“Bereshit bara Elokim” (Bereshit 1:1): the Torah opens with a bet.

No alphabet, says the Rav, concentrates so much thought in the letter itself. The aleph is a turning propeller: to enter creation is to enter a continuous movement in which each must take on his role from within. But the Torah did not begin with the aleph.

For when the Hebrew language wants to express unity, it moves from duality toward unity. Bet is two: a home is built from two people. And this duality is not limited to masculine and feminine: this world and the world beyond, the good inclination and the evil inclination — it is found everywhere. As soon as the primordial will decides to create, there is no more unity: there is only polarity.

That is why every book begins on page bet. That is how the very intimacy of the couple is called bi'ah, the meeting in which one joins the other; and it is the principle of the bayit, the house, the home.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is two that implies one, and not one that leads to two.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We dream of a unity that would spare us the other. Where did we want agreement without passing through disagreement — in our marriage, with a child, with a partner? And with whom do we still refuse to enter into the two?

Why is the name of G-d in the plural?



PRESENTATION

The first verse does not simply say “G-d”. It says Elokim, and Elokim is a plural. The Zohar itself reads a question into it: eleh mi, “these many — who?”.

THE QUESTION

How can the account of the Creator's unity open with a plural name — and what changes when the text adds the other Name to it?

THE ANSWER

The Zohar: Elokim read as “eleh mi”; Elokim has the same numerical value as hateva, nature (86).

Translating Elokim as “G-d” is already a faulty translation. The word is a question about the origin of creation: who created all this? And the question itself compels us to answer with a single force, not several deities. If it is plural, it is because creation presents itself to us that way, in its many facets.

Our sages saw in Elokim the numerical value of hateva, nature: to remain solely within the perspective of Elokim is to remain within Nature with a capital N, and within the principle of justice and law. For creating a world requires laws, and the laws of causality that govern the world at its different levels are plural.

Reaching unity presupposes a higher stage, which shows itself not in conception but in realization: on the day the Name drawn from the verb to be is joined to the name Elokim, we are told that there is love in this creation.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

There are not only the laws of causality: at some point they can be suspended, because love triumphs over all this strict justice.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We are rarely unjust; we are often merely just. Where did we apply the exact rule where it should have been suspended? And to whom do we still owe that suspension?

Six things preceded creation



PRESENTATION

Before the world existed, our sages list realities already created or already conceived. Some were actually created, others only planned, conceived before they came to be. The Rav takes them up one by one.

THE QUESTION

What could possibly have been needed before there was even a world — and why does Gehinnom appear on this list?

THE ANSWER

The midrash cited by the Rav, developed in tractate Pesachim: certain realities preceded the creation of the world.

The Torah first: just as every house follows the architect's plan, G-d conceived His creation and founded it on a law. Then the kisse hakavod, the Throne of Glory: the principle of not being overrun by one's creation, of being able to manage it, limit it, stop it. That is Shaddai, which we display on our doors: the mezuzah sets the limits of our activities within a given space. That is providence.

Next comes Gan Eden: this world is not a hell, as others have seen it; we are not here to serve out a life like a curse. Life is real, and this world offers man the possibility of revealing and fulfilling himself as a being created in the image of G-d.

And Gehinnom itself preceded creation: a dwelling that is no longer a source of well-being can become a tomb. Nature takes revenge when its laws are not respected; there is within nature itself a determinism of good and evil.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

This world is not left to chance: once it was created, G-d did not abandon it; He continues to govern it.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Is our home a source of well-being for everyone? And what limits — those the mezuzah marks on our door — keep us from being overrun by our own projects?

Repentance before the sin



PRESENTATION

In the list of realities that preceded the world, two are surprising: teshuvah, repentance, foreseen before there was a man to sin; and Israel, conceived even before the creation it was to serve.

THE QUESTION

Why did repentance have to be foreseen before the sin — and which came first, the Torah or Israel?

THE ANSWER

The midrash cited by the Rav: teshuvah and Israel are among the things that preceded creation.

The possibility of correcting man's straying, his errors, was conceived even before creation. He was not to be condemned forever by the sins he commits: he has the possibility of correcting them. And the principle of teshuvah, the Rav explains, is to restore the universe to its original design.

Israel, too, preceded creation, and because it preceded it, even if creation were to disappear, Israel would not. The word here designates the principle of the man for whom the world was created.

Which preceded which? Opinions were divided: without the Torah, Israel would not exist; without Israel, the Torah would have no reason to exist. The debate echoes that of Hillel and Shammai on heaven and earth, spirit and matter. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai decided: these creations cannot be separated; they are intertwined, dependent on each other.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Man was not to be condemned for life by the errors he commits.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Does someone at home believe himself condemned for life over a mistake? What would it take to “restore things to their original design” — and who can take the first step?

Six days, six senses



PRESENTATION

Bereshit can be read bara shit, “He created six”: six dimensions, six days. The Rav makes this number a key, which he finds in space, in the Shema, and even in man himself.

THE QUESTION

If we live the six days of creation through our senses, what is that sixth sense we always forget to count?

THE ANSWER

“Bara shit”: He created six. The six words of Shema Yisrael.

We live these six days through our six senses. People usually speak of five senses, but the Rambam, the Rav reports, counts a sixth: intuition. We are sometimes visited by an idea that goes beyond what we are living through; there is a foreknowledge, and everyone possesses this sense at his own level.

For just as there is a scale of hearing and a scale of sight, there is a scale of intuition. It is this sense that, as it is refined, becomes the prophetic sense.

Six also fits our surroundings: four cardinal points, plus below and above. It is found in the six words of the Shema, our profession of faith, which declare unity. And six is the only number under ten that its divisors add back up to: one, two and three make six.

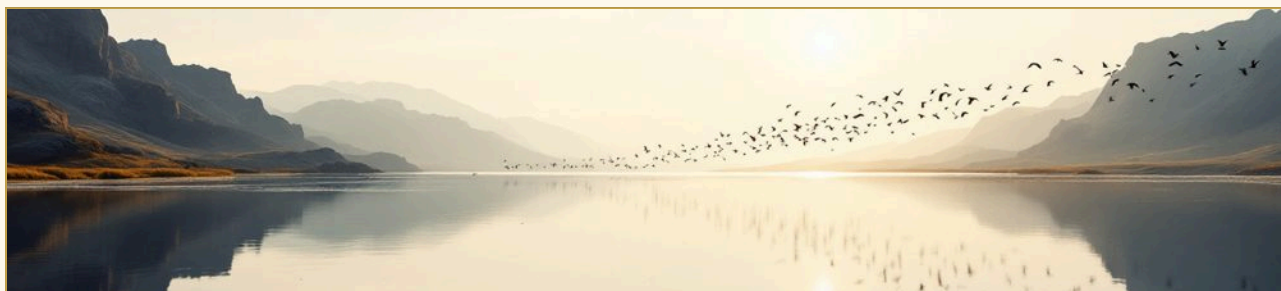
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Just as there is a scale of hearing and a scale of sight, there is also a scale of intuition.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Have we ever “sensed” something before understanding it — a decision, a person, a danger? How can we make room in the family for each person's intuition, without scorning it or following it blindly?

Three still days, three days in motion



PRESENTATION

The six days are not alike. The Rav distinguishes two stages in them: first spaces that are set in place without coming to life, then those same spaces beginning to live through the beings that inhabit them.

THE QUESTION

Why is the light of the first day “in motion” only on the fourth — and where does creation really begin?

THE ANSWER

“Let there be light” (Bereshit 1:3); “Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens” (Bereshit 1:14).

There is a static stage in creation. The first day, light, which is not yet in motion: it will be only on the fourth day. The second day, the separation of the lower waters from the upper waters. The third, the uncovering of the land.

Then these same spaces begin to live, to move, through the beings that inhabit them: on the fourth, fifth and sixth days.

There are three days, says the Kabbalah, that determine Shabbat, the seventh day, and three days that draw their sustenance from Shabbat. For the kabbalists, things take their place in the movement of creation only from the fourth day on; and those three days are set in motion by the radiance of Shabbat.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Creation in effect would begin not on the first day, but from the fourth day on.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In our projects, which part is “still” — preparing, setting up — and which part is motion? Does our week draw on the Shabbat that is coming, or only on the one that has passed?

The seventy-first nation



PRESENTATION

In the word bereshit, the Rav also hears bayit, house, and rosh, head, beginning. He reads in it a primordial thought about the house that is humanity, and the place Israel occupies in it.

THE QUESTION

Should humanity be conceived according to a single way of thinking — and what is Israel's place among the seventy nations?

THE ANSWER

Bereshit read as “bayit” and “rosh”: space and time.

There is a primordial thought in the design of this house that is humanity. Rosh is time; bayit is space: they are created simultaneously as soon as creation is conceived. There is no point separating time from space: each is the emissary of the other; they work together.

And bereshit is also the structure of the people of Israel. However many millions we may count, in our distribution across the world we are scattered among seventy peoples, and we are in a sense the seventy-first nation.

For there is no point conceiving humanity from a single point of view, a single way of thinking. There is room for a plurality of thoughts and ideologies — provided they aim at a supreme goal, meet one another and find their common centre of gravity.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

There is room for a plurality of thoughts, a plurality of ideologies, but they must aim at a supreme goal.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Around this table, we do not all think the same way. Yet what is the “centre of gravity” that brings us together? Can we name it?

"The earth was *tohu*" — why a world flawed from the start?



PRESENTATION

The first verse declares heaven and earth: the ideal of creation, held in a single sentence. The second undoes everything: the earth was *tohu* and *vohu*, and darkness was on the face of the deep.

THE QUESTION

Why did G-d, who could do anything, refuse to give us a perfect world — and what would be left for man to do in a finished world?

THE ANSWER

“Bereshit bara Elokim”: the final letters form *emet*, truth; **“asher bara Elokim la'asot”**, which G-d created to make (Bereshit 2:3).

Had G-d given us a perfect world, we would have no merit, nothing to do in it; we could neither flourish nor prove our abilities. Creation bears witness to a will for imperfection. That is why the final letters of the first three words form *emet*, truth — but a truth not in the ideal order; at the end of the account, in “which G-d created to make”, these final letters read the other way. The world is left to man with this task.

This *tohu* is the earth made of its four elements, bearing also four great civilizations — Babel, Madai, Yavan and Edom — that succeed one another in the race for domination. But in the midst of this disorder there is an order: *yehi or*, let there be light. Or has the numerical value 207, like *ein sof*, the infinite.

Creation *ex nihilo*, moreover, is not really from nothing: that nothingness G-d first willed.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

When man chooses his trajectory, in an evolution that is not horizontal but vertical, in a spiral, he finds himself G-d's partner in bringing this universe to fulfilment.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We demand finished things: a career, a marriage, successful children. What have we given up because it would never be perfect? And what share of the unfinished are we ready to carry without blaming anyone for it?

Mikra: a text that calls for its reading



PRESENTATION

Why does the Torah open with an account of creation that, scientifically, sheds no decisive light? The Rav answers with the word that designates Scripture: mikra.

THE QUESTION

If the Torah is not a physics textbook, what is it for — and are we allowed to make it say whatever we like?

THE ANSWER

“Make Your ways known to me” (Shemot 33:13); the thirteen rules of Rabbi Yishmael.

Just as this world cannot be conceived without the law of causality, it cannot be detached from the spirit that presided over its creation. The Torah is not a way of seeing things: it is torat chayim, the law of life. Reading is keriah; mikra is a call from within: the text suggests its reading to me, and I read what it suggests. The initial mem makes it a keli, a tool, needed where darkness reigns over the deep, where we know neither how to interpret nor how to read.

These tools, the Rav says in answer to a question, are the Torah itself, through the thirteen rules of Rabbi Yishmael: analogy, inference, the exception and the general rule.

These thirteen rules match the thirteen attributes of G-d: between the first Elokim of the text and its second mention, there are thirteen words. That is how Moshe, who asked to know G-d's ways, was able to grasp Him.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We are allowed to search the text, to turn it over from within; we are not allowed to discard it.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

When a passage of the Torah troubles us, do we tend to search it or set it aside? Let us choose a verse of the parashah together and look for what it “suggests” to each of us.

SUBJECT 11

Humanity's first object was a garment



PRESENTATION

The animal feels no such need. Man covers himself — and even when he opts for total nudity, he keeps a string, a cord, a little ribbon, as if to mark his person with the symbol of a garment.

THE QUESTION

Why is the first thing man adds to his nature a garment — and how can a garment let light through instead of hiding it?

THE ANSWER

The mitzvah of tzitzit, attached to the corners of the garment.

All light needs a keli, a container, a film, a membrane that can hold it and keep it from scattering. That is how the world was designed: the covering clings to the fruit, to the body, to the light, and itself contributes to the intensity of that light.

Now what characterizes man in his original creation is the garment. It is the first thing he added to his nature: after the sin, when he found himself unable to approach the divine light, he took fig leaves to hide his nakedness.

That is why we wear tzitzit on our garments, and why we hold on to these threads.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We want our garments to shine, not to be opaque, not to hide our own light, and not to become a hypocrite's cloak.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Our clothes, our manners, our roles: do they let others see who we are, or do they serve to hide it? Without revealing anything, let each ask himself what in him tends to become a “cloak”.

SUBJECT 12

The Shabbat of all humanity



PRESENTATION

At the end of the lecture, a listener is surprised: if Shabbat is at the centre of creation, why do the nations have no share in it? The Rav challenges the starting point of the question.

THE QUESTION

Was Shabbat given to the Jews alone — and why does Adam, learning that one can repent, at once sing the song of Shabbat?

THE ANSWER

“Mizmor shir leyom haShabbat” (Tehillim 92:1); Bereshit Rabbah 22:13.

Shabbat became the property of the Jewish people; it was not so in the original plan. Adam was not Jewish: he was the prototype of all humanity, and the people of Israel is its embryo. There is no reason for the Jewish people to exist without the other peoples, nor for them without it: Israel is the centre of gravity of humanity as Shabbat is that of creation.

The laws given to humanity after the flood do not include Shabbat; it appears as a commandment only in the Ten Commandments, at once a celebration of creation and a remembrance of the exodus from Egypt, of man's liberation.

And the holiness of this day implies a return, a renewal at the source. Our sages tell that Adam meets Kayin, who has just killed his brother, and asks him how he got out of it: “I confessed my sin, I expressed my regret.” Adam discovers that repentance exists, and at once recites the song of Shabbat: in Shabbat there is shuv, to return.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

When G-d sanctified Shabbat, He sanctified it for all humanity.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What would a Shabbat of “return” be for us, rather than a mere day of rest? Toward what, or toward whom, would we like to return this Shabbat?