

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

BERESHIT

12 Questions to Ask at the Shabbat Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Bereshit: The First Murder in History”: G-d's silence before the
blood of Hevel, the reprieve granted to Kayin and the sign that
protects him, then a line of descendants who build cities and forge
weapons — up to Shet, the first “son”.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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Themes for reflection and questions to share around the Bereshit table

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SUBJECT 01

"Am I my brother's keeper?"



PRESENTATION

The first murder has taken place, and G-d turns to Kayin to call him to account. Kayin does not agree: my brother's keeper, in principle, is You. And it is true that G-d let it happen.

THE QUESTION

What can be said of this silence of G-d at the moment a man kills his brother — and to whom, exactly, is Hevel's blood addressed?

THE ANSWER

"Am I my brother's keeper?" (Bereshit 4:9); "The voice of your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground" (Bereshit 4:10).

What can be said of this silence, this eclipse, when violence rages and a man kills his brother without really knowing why? The world of creation runs normally without its Creator being constantly called upon, and this indeed seems to answer His original will.

But we should not read that Hevel's blood cries out to G-d: it rises up against Him. It asks: why did You let it happen? And it demands that G-d intervene. This dialogue between Kayin and the Creator takes place at the level of conscience, for the moral order has not yet appeared: man does not know that he was able to kill his brother.

What already exists, on the other hand, is the will to diminish the other's authority, to subjugate it.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

That is how man works: he needs to be recognized.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

When something terrible happens, we readily ask "where was G-d?". Let us also ask: where were we? And in our own home, who needs to be recognized without daring to say so?

The tree of knowledge, or the tree of will?



PRESENTATION

Ets hadaat is always translated as the tree of knowledge. But daat is not first of all knowledge: it is will. And man does not face this tree alone: woman was given to him as ezer kenegdo, a helper who stands opposite him.

THE QUESTION

If good and evil were not already in the nature of things, what did this tree really bring into the world?

THE ANSWER

“The tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Bereshit 2:9); woman given as “ezer kenegdo” (Bereshit 2:18).

It is the tree that determines the will for good and for evil, for good and evil are not in the nature of creation. It is man who directs his action toward what he considers good, or toward what endangers his own life. Had this original will not depended on his choice, the world would have answered the Creator's will like the other laws of nature.

Without desire, the fruit of instinct and impulse, and without covetousness, the fruit of an intellectual process, man would not have sinned. But he could not have widened his field of thought or the reach of his achievements: neither spread out horizontally nor rise vertically.

And all this passes through the one who was given to him to help him fulfil himself. If a close friend whom I trust sets me on a path, I can walk it with my eyes closed: who could have thought there was a trap there?

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Good and evil are the fruit of man's commitment.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We would like drives without the risks they carry. What desire did we want to suppress, in ourselves or in a child, instead of giving it a direction?

The health of the family cell



PRESENTATION

For now, the Rav stresses, the whole of man's life takes place within the family cell: intimacy with his wife, the children. And in the struggle between the two brothers, one detail is striking: the parents do not intervene.

THE QUESTION

Can we claim to change the world before we have cleared the air we breathe at home — and what does the parents' absence say about the drama of Kayin and Hevel?

THE ANSWER

Bereshit 4:1-8: from the first child to the first murder.

Let us remember that, for now, man's life takes place in total intimacy with his wife and at the level of the children. We cannot project anything outward if we have not first sought to make the climate, the atmosphere, the living conditions inside the family healthy: a man in relation to his spouse, and in relation to his children.

That is also why the Rav points out the eclipse of the parents in this struggle between their children. The text does not have them intervene: two brothers confront each other, and those who brought them into the world are absent from the story.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Everything depends on the health of this family cell, for the future of all humanity.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What weighed down the atmosphere at home this week? And in the children's quarrels, are the parents too present — or absent, as in the story?

Recognition that comes down



PRESENTATION

Everyone wants to be recognized, and recognition naturally rises from below: we recognize the one who stands above us. The Rav places morality in the opposite movement.

THE QUESTION

Why is it so hard to recognize the one who is “below” us — and why is that where morality begins?

THE ANSWER

Recognition goes from the bottom upward. Morality, for its part, lies where I reach out to the other when I could ignore him or do without him, and where, on the contrary, I want to make him a partner in my project.

Why? Because I sense that I could multiply my creative possibilities, my capacity to achieve, tenfold if he is associated with what I do.

And we know that the consequences are never limited to the person we are dealing with: they concern his children, his grandchildren, those around him. That is the very movement of life here below.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is hard to recognize from the top down, and yet that is what is asked of us.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Whose opinion could we easily do without — someone younger, an employee, a child? What project could we share with them this week?

SUBJECT 05

A land where one cannot take root



PRESENTATION

Kayin cries out: you are going to curse me again! The curse, says the Rav, is first of all that of the ground. But the wandering that follows from it is not only geographical.

THE QUESTION

What does a man lose when the ground no longer feeds him — and what exile is really at stake?

THE ANSWER

“A fugitive and a wanderer shall you be on the earth” (Bereshit 4:12).

The adamah, the ground, is what allows Adam to grow, to flourish, to develop: it is what feeds him. From the moment the ground is cursed, it is man who is deprived of his possibilities of growth. To fulfil oneself, one must be able to drop anchor; if the ground rejects us, if we must start everything over, move from day to day, constantly rebuild ourselves, that is no life.

Yet the verse says ba'arets, and erets points to ratson, to the cosmic will. Man is no longer in harmony with this world of creation.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

This exile is not exile from the ground that feeds me: it is exile from that will.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Where does each of us feel rooted: a place, a home, a community? And when we are at peace everywhere except with ourselves, what is left of our roots?

Why is the first murderer not sentenced to death?



PRESENTATION

Kayin fears being killed in turn. G-d does not condemn him: He grants him a reprieve, and announces that whoever kills him will be avenged sevenfold.

THE QUESTION

How can the first murder in history earn a pardon rather than a sentence?

THE ANSWER

“Whoever kills Kayin, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold” (Bereshit 4:15).

If we felt that for the slightest lapse, the slightest fault, everything were called into question without offering man any way out, life would be unbearable: man is always exposed to his impulses, his desires, his cravings. G-d does not sentence Kayin to death: He grants him a reprieve.

Kayin says it himself: if this violence is tolerated, I will in turn become its victim, and not for any sublime ideals. Violence will become commonplace, and it will govern relations between people. It is this argument that leads the Creator to give him a sign.

And the principle of the city of refuge, for one who killed unintentionally, is granted to Kayin: until then, he did not know what death was. When a man no longer belongs to himself, possessed by a mad rage, how can he be held fully responsible? The lesson is taught in passing.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

There is a will that does violence to me, and this will that does violence to me condemns me to go on living.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Is a single fault sometimes enough, among us, to “condemn” someone forever? And conversely, what anger do we let pass as an excuse, at the risk of making violent words commonplace?

The sign of Kayin



PRESENTATION

“And the L-rd set a sign for Kayin.” The text does not say which. Our sages have proposed several answers, and each says something about the second chance granted to a murderer.

THE QUESTION

What sign can protect a murderer without erasing his crime?

THE ANSWER

“And the L-rd set a sign for Kayin” (Bereshit 4:15); Bereshit Rabbah 22:12: the sun, the dog, the horn.

The midrash speaks of the dog that had until then guarded Hevel's flock: from now on it will be in Kayin's service and guard him against all who seek to avenge Hevel's death. For they would not truly be avenging that blood.

Another interpretation speaks of a solar mark on his forehead: he will no longer fall victim to the forces of the night, he will be able to reach a new life — a new day, a new sun.

Others speak of a horn. Could it be the horn of defence, of human intelligence, or of a vision reaching beyond his own perception of things? The text is silent on the matter.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is not Hevel's blood they will avenge: they will simply justify every act of violence against you by your own misdeeds.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

When someone has done wrong, are we tempted to make him pay for everything “in the name” of his victim? What “new day” could we offer someone trying to rebuild himself?

Avenged sevenfold: the cycle of Chanoch



PRESENTATION

“Whoever kills Kayin, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.” For the Rav, this sevenfold locks Kayin into a cycle. And our sages give a surprising model of it: Chanoch, of whom the Torah will say that he lived three hundred and sixty-five years.

THE QUESTION

Can a righteous man turned in on himself lay claim to a World to Come?

THE ANSWER

“All the days of Chanoch were three hundred and sixty-five years” (Bereshit 5:23).

Kayin will not be able to escape this movement of creation in which everything is condemned to live and to disappear at the end of a cycle. The model our sages give of it is Chanoch: three hundred and sixty-five years, like a complete cycle of creation, running from every new germination to total decay, and then returning.

Could this be the fate of humanity, the fate of man? No. Chanoch's model is that of the man closed and turned in on himself. However righteous his life, he can never lay claim to a World to Come, and he will remain locked in this repetitive cycle of life and death.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is not Chanoch the tsaddik who is taken as the model.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Are there “cycles” at home that come back every year — the same quarrels, the same resolutions? What would open us to others and bring us out of the circle?

Going out from before the L-rd



PRESENTATION

Reassured by the sign, “Kayin went out from before the L-rd and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden”. One might read it as flight. The Rav reads it as a way of living with one's fault.

THE QUESTION

What does “going out from before the L-rd” mean: forgetting one's fault, or moving beyond it?

THE ANSWER

“Kayin went out from before the L-rd and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden” (Bereshit 4:16); “with all your heart” (Devarim 6:5).

It is a way of moving beyond one's fault, one's sin, of not stagnating in one's downfall — without wanting to forget it or ignore it. We do not live twenty-four hours a day with Hashem, nor even with our own conscience: there is a great deal of dead time in our lives, and it is this that casts into shadow behaviour that does not always do us credit.

The point is to be able to integrate one's misdeeds into a way of life that carries one beyond them. That is what it means to love the L-rd with all one's heart, that is, with both one's inclinations: the will that governs reason and the will that governs desire.

To settle east of Eden is to carry one's values wherever one goes, and to bring one's life up to date with the awareness of moving forward.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

To live before the Creator while accounting for one's misdeeds is not to minimize them.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We know both traps: brooding over a fault until we build nothing more, or minimizing it until we forget it. Where does each of us stand?

SUBJECT 10

He built a city and named it after his son



PRESENTATION

After the murder, Kayin starts life over — and it is through his children that we follow him. His son is born, and at once a city is built, bearing the child's name. The wandering is now merely virtual.

THE QUESTION

Where is the mistake of this father who builds a city in his son's name — and why does the word ben, son, not yet appear in the text?

THE ANSWER

“He built a city and called it after the name of his son, Chanoch” (Bereshit 4:17); Irad, Mechuyael, Metushael, Lemekh (Bereshit 4:18).

The word ben derives from the verb to build, but the child is not always the builder of the house: he may even be a source of instability within it. That is why the text does not use it here yet. Kayin's mistake is not to build: it is to want to perpetuate his life through the name of a city, failing to go beyond the stage of stone to inscribe his life in another time.

What follows confirms it. Irad, Mechuyael, Metushael: so many negative names, which weaken faith in a Creator and set aside the idea of an original will in creation.

Elsewhere, the Torah will be content to say that generations had sons and daughters. Here it tells the story, because at the outset there was a will to educate. If this education missed its goal, it is because it froze, focused solely on the name of the city, which is the children's name.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

They gave their names to monuments.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We too build cities in our children's names: a business, a house, a reputation. Let each say what he believes he is handing down. Does what we pass on bear our name, or their future?

SUBJECT 11

Lemekh, two wives, three trades



PRESENTATION

In the sixth generation after Kayin, on the eve of the seventh, bigamy appears: Lemekh takes two wives, Adah and Tzillah. And among the names of their children, a name thought to have been erased comes back.

THE QUESTION

What is the Torah saying by separating the roles of two wives — and why does Hevel's name reappear among the descendants of his murderer?

THE ANSWER

“Lemekh took two wives: the name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other Tzillah” (Bereshit 4:19).

One, says the Rav, overshadows her husband by her grace, her beauty; the other raises a large family. What could have been a way of appreciating a woman is here made vulgar, trivialized, by recognizing the status of two wives. The confusion carries a different culture, a civilization that the text notes in passing.

They tried to do away with Hevel, and yet his name returns in Kayin's line: Yaval, Yuval, Tuval-Kayin. The first develops livestock herding, the second music and the art of instruments, the third instruments of war, sharpening weapons of copper and iron.

Their sister is called Naamah, who will become Noah's wife, so named because she was pleasant in her ways. It is on the feminine side that the possibility appears of neutralizing the violence Tuval-Kayin had developed.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In our families too, we “separate the roles”: the one who shines, the one who carries. Does someone at home live in the others' shadow? And who knows how to calm things, like Naamah, when tension rises?

SUBJECT 12

This time, a son



PRESENTATION

Adam reappears. The midrash tells that he met Kayin and asked him how his judgment had ended. The answer will change his own life, and the text then uses, for the first time, the word *ben*, son.

THE QUESTION

What did Adam understand by listening to Kayin — and why is Shet the first child the Torah calls a “son”?

THE ANSWER

“Adam knew his wife again; she bore a son and called his name Shet” (Bereshit 4:25).

Kayin answers him: I acknowledged my fault, I said the sentence was just, that my sin was heavy to bear, and I asked for the chance to rebuild myself. Adam draws a conclusion about himself: his children had been merely the disastrous consequence of shifting his responsibility onto his wife, that magnificent gift G-d had given him to assist him — of that lack of recognition.

So he knows his wife again, and the text says she bore a *ben*: it is the first time we see this word. Shet is the new seed that takes the place of Hevel, killed by his brother, and his name comes to counter whatever was even slightly negative in the name Hevel.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

This time there is a son: no longer merely offspring.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Acknowledging our share instead of shifting it onto our spouse: what would that change in our quarrels? Without saying it aloud, let each think of one thing for which he wrongly held the other responsible.