

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

BERESHIT

12 Questions to Ask at the Shabbat Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture “Bereshit — The Foundations of the Human Being”: what holds a human being together even before the Torah, why the world rests on the “little man”, and what the great principle of the Torah is according to Ben Azzai. All the way to the yud, the invisible point that holds everything.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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Themes for reflection and questions to share around the Bereshit table

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SUBJECT 01

The partner who overrates himself



PRESENTATION

The Rav takes stock of chapter 4. The first family is not the product of blind evolution: it is a work of creation, and it is aware of a Creator. And yet everything in it goes awry.

THE QUESTION

If the first human beings knew there was a Creator, where do their failures come from — and where should we look for them first?

THE ANSWER

Bereshit, chapter 4: the first family's groping attempts.

Man does not accept being only what he is: he wants to be G-d's direct partner in the work of creation, and he ends up defying his own possibilities, his own capacities. That is the source of all the disorders of history and all its failures.

These failures stem from family upbringing, from the way the children were conceived and launched into life — and above all from the fact that brotherhood was not settled from the start.

Yet brotherhood presupposes the first law of creation: there is always a *zachar* and a *nekevah*, a giver and a receiver, and a will on both sides to coordinate their efforts in order to move forward. It is on this point that the first family fails.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The failures are not at the level of humanity in general, but first and foremost at the level of the family.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In our family, who gives and who receives? Do the roles circulate, or are they fixed? Let each say what he received from another this week, and what he gave him.

SUBJECT 02

The middot before the Torah



PRESENTATION

The new face of creation emerges through Shabbat and the number seven. Why seven? Because the emphasis, says the Rav, is on one's way of being rather than on wisdom and intelligence.

THE QUESTION

Why does the Torah contain no “morality”, but rules of conduct — and what must one have done before approaching it?

THE ANSWER

The seventh day, and the seventh millennium: the seventh Shabbat in the history of humanity.

Our masters took Shabbat as the reference for the seventh millennium. The progressions and transformations of society will always follow this number seven. If it was chosen, it is because the emphasis is on how one behaves rather than on attributes that elude us, such as chochmah and binah, wisdom and understanding: they are not always within our reach.

The Torah did not dictate a mode of behaviour; there is no morality in the Torah, but rules of conduct, because it considered these behaviours already acquired. The work on oneself, on one's middot, one's virtues, one's way of being, must have been done beforehand.

It is difficult, the Rav acknowledges: one does not progress in life through imperatives, especially when they are imposed on us from outside and are not our own. That is doomed to failure.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The Torah cannot be the portion of a person who has not worked on himself, on his middot, his virtues, his way of being.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Which house rule does a child experience as “imposed from outside”? How could it become his own? And which character trait would each of us like to work on this week?

SUBJECT 03

Violence disguised as construction



PRESENTATION

Chapter 4 is the picture of man outside the Garden of Eden: a man does violence to his brother over problems our society still knows. Then come a city, trades, discoveries.

THE QUESTION

Can progress, culture and science heal a society's violence — and if not, what makes man change?

THE ANSWER

Kayin's city, herding, music and the forge (Bereshit 4:17-22).

One way of making up for violence is to disguise it with the will to build: a city, institutions, achievements, discoveries in industry, music, weaponry or agriculture. But this does not hide the problems inherent in life within society; we are still grappling with them, and with the violence that follows.

For man to change, he would have to stop seeing himself in permanent competition with the other, and consider that he must contribute, in his own measure, his share to the building of this world.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

However much we mask these problems with a great cultural and scientific breakthrough, man does not change.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

When tension weighs on the home, do we sometimes “disguise” it with a project, a purchase, an outing? What would take us, among ourselves, out of competition?

SUBJECT 04

The step Hevel did not take



PRESENTATION

Kayin always gets the blame. The Rav also turns to Hevel: his offering was accepted, his brother's was not. What did he do with this success?

THE QUESTION

When my offering is accepted and my brother's is refused, what is asked of me?

THE ANSWER

“When your enemy falls, do not rejoice” (Mishlei 24:17).

A family is not founded at any price. Rather than the Creator speaking to Kayin to tell him he could still move forward, it was up to Hevel to take a step toward his brother, and to share with him his dismay at not seeing his offering accepted by the Creator.

The right response to another's failure is not withdrawal, but a step toward him. It is the absence of this step that leaves the field open to violence.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

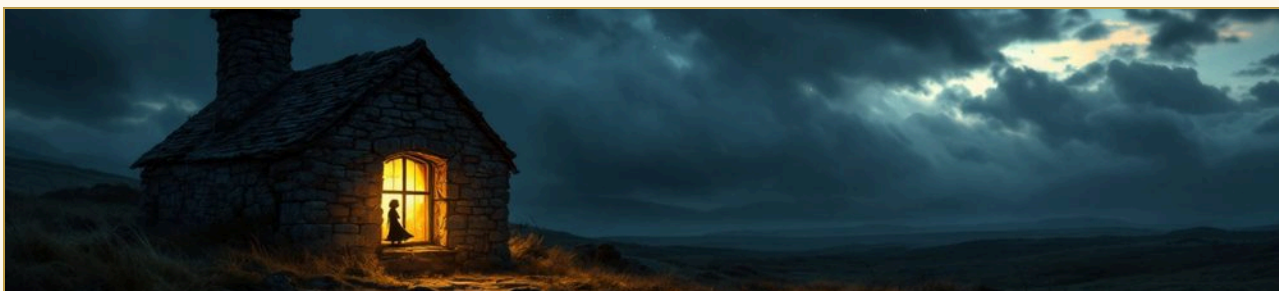
Do not rejoice when your enemy stumbles: that is not an attitude, that is not a way to behave.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Who in the family has just failed where another succeeded — an exam, a project, a position? What concrete step can the one who succeeded take toward him this week?

SUBJECT 05

A child in a world of violence



PRESENTATION

After the murder, Shet nevertheless brings a child into the world. The question is legitimate: should one commit to giving life when society does not at all meet our expectations?

THE QUESTION

What drives one to bring a child into a violent world — and why does the Torah not say “give birth” in the same way for the mother and for the father?

THE ANSWER

The Torah says vateled of the mother, and vayoled of the father.

It is hard to decide to have a child when we live in a world of violence. And yet Shet brings a child into the world.

The text marks a nuance here. When the birth is attributed to the woman, it says vateled; when it is attributed to the man, vayoled. The woman, in bringing a child into the world, wants to keep him, to surround him with all her love, and she dreads the day she will have to part from him — it is not always easy.

The man, for his part, is aware that when he brings a child into the world, it is to allow society to evolve: he considers that wherever he stands is always a stage before the new Shabbat to come, the next step.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Despite everything, bringing a child into the world is an act of faith.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What do we expect of our children: that they stay close to us, or that they move the world forward? Parents, let each name the part of you that “keeps” and the part that “sends”.

Enosh, the little man



PRESENTATION

Ten generations separate Adam from Noah, ten separate Noah from Avraham. Within this structure, the Torah points to a man apparently without a story: Enosh, the son of Shet.

THE QUESTION

Why does the world rest on the “little man” — and what distinguishes enosh, gever, ish and adam?

THE ANSWER

“To Shet, too, a son was born, and he called his name Enosh” (Bereshit 4:26).

History evolves at the end of ten generations: it is a structure of creation, and the transformations of society come at the completion of each. These are, says the Rav, small messianic moments that we live through at different stages, and to which we are not very sensitive. The Torah helps us put our finger on one of them by naming Enosh: neither a hero nor a rebel, the common run of men.

Man has four attributes. Enosh, the humanity of the man concerned with survival; gever, the revolutionary; ish, the man of morality; and finally adam, the prototype of the ideal man. Adam, because within him is adamah, the earth, which gives a being the strength to grow, and a will to resemble what is above him: not to equal G-d, but to aspire to the very height of his abilities.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Enosh is a man aware of his insignificance compared with others, but who is determined at all costs to lay his stone in the building of this world.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Who among those close to us is a “little man” on whom everything rests without anyone noticing? Let us thank him this week. And we — what stone are we laying?

Calling on the Name, or profaning it?



PRESENTATION

At the birth of Enosh, the verse adds: “then men began to call on the Name of the L-rd”. But the word *huchal* can also be read as a profanation. A paradox: the Name begins to be profaned just as belief spreads.

THE QUESTION

How can a belief, as it spreads, empty the Name of G-d of its content?

THE ANSWER

“Az *huchal* likro *beshem Hashem*” (Bereshit 4:26); Rashi: *huchal*, from *chullin*, the profane.

There are two explanations. The first: with the birth of Enosh, belief spreads in a higher power that governs the world. The second: this knowledge, as it spreads, fosters idolatry; the Name was made profane, emptied of its content.

How does this happen? When belief in Hashem becomes a popular belief, it becomes the object of selfish hopes, national hopes, battle hymns. Everyone believes in Hashem in his own way; everyone has appropriated Him, and believes He is his, bent solely over his own problem.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

That is the misfortune of humanity in its quest for G-d.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Do we sometimes pray as if G-d were concerned only with our problem? For whom other than ourselves could we pray this Shabbat?

SUBJECT 08

The book each of us writes



PRESENTATION

Chapter 5 opens with “the book of the generations of Adam”. With it, we leave the limited framework of the mishpachah, the family, to enter that of humanity. And the word sefer, book, has four meanings for the Rav.

THE QUESTION

What is the “book” of our life — and what should we keep in it, cut out, pass on?

THE ANSWER

“Zeh sefer toldot Adam”, this is the book of the generations of Adam (Bereshit 5:1).

Bereshit is not merely the youth of history: it is the whole of history, and it concerns all of humanity. Sefer is first of all the story: each person writes the story of his life; it is his book. For this story, one does not always need a child: whoever does not take part in building the work begun by past generations can even endanger all that has been built.

The second meaning is that of the snapshot: there are many snapshots in a life, and much dead time. The Torah will say “all the days that he lived”, as if there were days when one does not live, made up for by others. The third meaning is to cut: to analyse, but also to eliminate, to set aside certain aspects and integrate others.

The fourth is the book of life: when one has polished one's life, made it transparent, one can pass it on to one's children.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is a book that accompanies man from his first steps to the completion of his mission.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

If each of us wrote the book of his week, which page would he keep, which would he cut? And which page of our family story do we want to pass on to the children?

Loving one's neighbour, or loving man?



PRESENTATION

What is the fundamental principle of the Torah, the one on which everything rests? Rabbi Akiva and Ben Azzai do not answer with the same verse, and it is Ben Azzai who cites the first verse of chapter 5.

THE QUESTION

Why would “love your neighbour as yourself” not be enough as the great principle of the Torah?

THE ANSWER

Bereshit Rabbah 24:7: for Ben Azzai, “This is the book of the generations of Adam” is a great principle of the Torah; for Rabbi Akiva, “Love your neighbour as yourself” (Vayikra 19:18).

Rabbi Akiva answers: love your neighbour as yourself. Hillel, asked by a would-be convert for the whole Torah while standing on one foot, had put it more down to earth: what is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. For loving one's neighbour as oneself is very difficult.

Ben Azzai objects: this verse assumes that you love the one close to you, the one with whom you share your life — first your wife, then your children, then your friends. But what will you do with the others? This is where the Torah's morality begins: not with the degree of love I bear my neighbour, but with the way I approach the distant one, the stranger.

That is why there are three loves in the Torah: you shall love the L-rd your G-d; you shall love your neighbour as yourself; you shall love the stranger.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

I must consider only Adam, and not merely the re'a, the neighbour.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Loving those close to us costs little; it is the distant one who costs. Let each name someone he keeps outside his circle without admitting it. Which “stranger” could we invite to our table?

SUBJECT 10

The face of the other



PRESENTATION

The verse says that G-d made man “in the likeness of Elokim”: bidmut, and not here betzelem, in the image. The nuance, for the Rav, changes the way we look at the other.

THE QUESTION

What distinguishes image from likeness — and why is the likeness that of Elokim, and not of the Name of the L-rd?

THE ANSWER

“On the day that Elokim created man, He made him in the likeness of Elokim” (Bereshit 5:1).

The tzelem is the framework: what makes me see the other as a competitor, or as someone who lends me a hand in what I seek to obtain. The demut is more inward: it is the face. Now panim, the face, points to penimiyut, inwardness, what each person hides within. Yet we play with our face; we make it up with all kinds of expressions. We ought to be able to discover the face of the other, the inner life of those around us.

And it is a demut of Elokim. The four-letter Name we can in no way appropriate; each time we undertake something in its name, it is an act of chessed, of kindness — a blessing is an act of kindness. Elokim, for its part, is the principle of justice, the inviolable laws of creation.

But through each mitzvah done in the name of the Ineffable Name, it is possible to inject love into this notion of Elokim that confronts us through every face that judges us, scrutinizes us, accepts us or rejects us.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What face do we show at home, and what face outside? Let each name, for another member of the family, an “inner” quality he has discovered behind that person’s usual face.

SUBJECT 11

The yud, an invisible centre of gravity



PRESENTATION

The smallest letter of the alphabet is the yud: a mere point, over which we have no hold. Yet the Rav makes it the key to all rehabilitation.

THE QUESTION

How can a tiny portion set aside be enough to redeem a whole — a garment, a meal, a space, a week?

THE ANSWER

Tzitzit, the mitzvah of challah, circumcision, the Land of Israel and Shabbat.

An object holds together only thanks to its centre of gravity: it is a point, the point of balance; it is not visible, and yet it exists. Aware of the possibility that a being might degenerate, the Creator left the yud as the letter of the World to Come, the letter of becoming.

Clothing bears the mark of sin: man uses it to cover acts of enormous gravity. G-d gave him the means to rehabilitate it through the yud of the tzitzit. Man damaged his food: he received the mitzvah of challah, in which a yud of the dough is set aside to bring it into another order of holiness. The same goes for circumcision.

And the Land of Israel is the yud of space, as Shabbat is the yud of time: by itself, it justifies the work of the six days of creation.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Every person has a yud, a small yud, and it is from it that he can fulfil himself.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What is the “yud” of our week — the small gesture, the small mitzvah, the tiny moment that holds all the rest? Let each choose one for the coming week.

SUBJECT 12

A man without a wife is not Adam



PRESENTATION

Our masters said it: a man without a wife does not deserve the title adam. Yet this was put to Ben Azzai, who had chosen not to marry. His answer sheds light on the verse in which Adam at last fathers a son “in his likeness”.

THE QUESTION

Why were Adam's first children not “in his likeness, after his image”, and what does Ben Azzai answer those who catch him out?

THE ANSWER

“Any man who has no wife is not an adam” (Yevamot 63a); “He begot in his likeness, after his image” (Bereshit 5:3).

Man acts in this world under the principle of zachar and nekevah, giver and receiver: that is the source of blessing, and that is what makes the adam. Yet Ben Azzai, who had not taken a wife, was asked where he stood. He answered that others were better able than he to fulfil it; for him, fulfilling this love through the Torah could take the place of the feminine presence as of that of the child.

It is in this light that chapter 5 says of Adam that he brings a child into the world in his likeness and after his image. The first children, Kayin and Hevel, were not: they represented him neither in framework nor in face. Adam had separated from his wife, unsure of how they would turn out.

From now on the generations will follow one another. Not all will accomplish great things, and we are not able to judge them; their culmination will be Noah.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The generations follow one another; what matters is to see what they culminate in.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What in our home truly “resembles” us — our values, our gestures, our way of welcoming? What would we like our children to recognize of us in their own lives?