

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

CHAYEI SARAH

12 Questions for the Shabbat Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Chayei Sarah — The Family of Avraham”: why the Torah names
Avraham's relatives just before Sarah's death, why a spiritual life
cannot be copied, and how holiness can sprout in the heart of a
family that had lost it. Up to a small letter, in the word that says
Avraham wept.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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SUBJECT 01

A Spiritual Life Cannot Be Copied



PRESENTATION

Avraham passed through the furnace to which his struggle against the idolatry of his time had led him, and he did not perish. His brother Haran went in and did not come out. The Rav looks for what distinguishes them.

THE QUESTION

Why does one survive the trial and the other not — and what does Haran teach us about our own practice?

THE ANSWER

“The G-d of gods” (Devarim 10:17).

The world was not ready to embrace what Avraham was discovering: not a creator reduced to his role as creator, but a G-d who reveals Himself through man, and who encompasses all beliefs — the G-d of gods. Avraham survives the trial because man cannot be reduced to the physical matter he is made of. The ideal he carries within him outlives him, and it is never called to die.

Haran, his brother, does not live this ideal from within, but from without. And this, unfortunately, is something we very often do: we copy those around us, in practice as in study. We do not give our soul the opportunity to assert itself, to create, to bring out its real substance, which is indispensable to the development of the universe.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

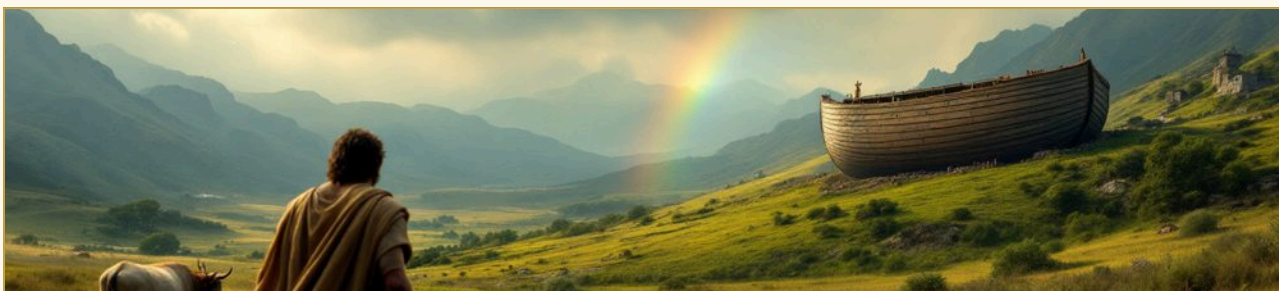
A spiritual life cannot be copied. It is created. It is personal. It is what carries a man.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What do we do, in our practice or our study, only because “everyone does it”? Let each person name a gesture he has made his own, that he understands and loves. And another that he could, this year, stop copying and start creating.

SUBJECT 02

Adam and Noah: Two Attempts



PRESENTATION

To understand what Avraham brings, the Rav goes back to two men before him: Adam first, then Noah, ten generations later. Each embodies a way of being G-d's man in the world, and each runs up against a limit.

THE QUESTION

Where did Adam and Noah fail, they who had received everything?

THE ANSWER

“To work it and to guard it” (Bereshit 2:15); “Noah, the man of the earth” (Bereshit 9:20).

Adam had a passive role: the garden had to be worked and guarded. He felt the need to make himself useful, to create, to understand by himself, to fulfil himself by himself. But he did not respect the instructions, and he was driven out of that world of perfection.

Noah is called righteous, the foundation of the universe and of humanity. He is not content to take life as it comes: he becomes the partner in the covenant, the partner in bringing this world to fulfilment. He lives in a miniature universe, the ark, where he orders everyone's life while the flood strikes the whole universe, then he gives the world a new face, with the covenant of the rainbow.

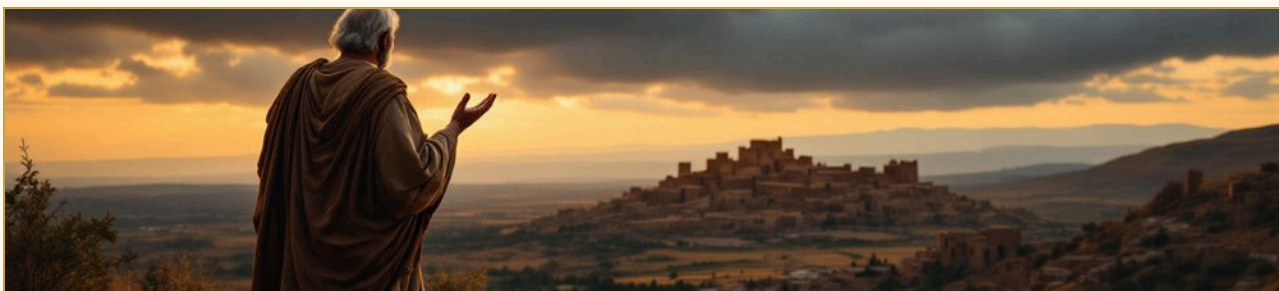
But he raised his three children to be so independent that he could not fuse them into one — this becomes apparent only later. Seized by pride at having escaped the flood, he ends up a man of the earth, the one who gives humanity the plough.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Adam wanted to understand everything by himself; Noah raised children too independent to form a whole. Which of these two risks threatens our family most? Let each person say what makes us remain “one” at home.

SUBJECT 03

Pleading for the Guilty



PRESENTATION

Avraham is not content to live with the Creator, nor to make a covenant with Him. When G-d announces to him the fate of Sodom, he engages Him in serious discussion — to the point of asking whether the Judge of all the earth will not do justice.

THE QUESTION

Why does Avraham plead for people whom the Torah itself declares wicked and sinners?

THE ANSWER

“Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?” (Bereshit 18:25).

Avraham is the one who, through man, will reveal the Creator. That is why he engages G-d in this discussion about Sodom. He even seeks to save people of whom the text says that they are wicked and great sinners.

Despite everything, they are Divine creatures. They are not entirely responsible for what they have become. A way to save them ought to be found.

His prayer was not answered. But, adds the Rav, the life of a master springs from his roots.

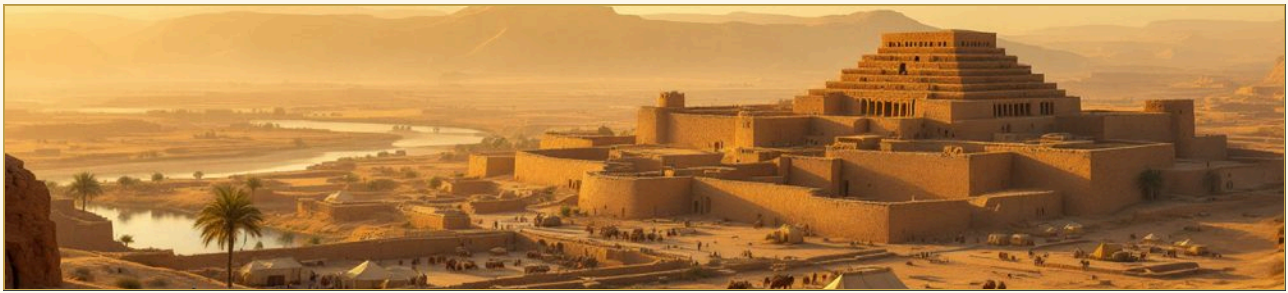
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

They are Divine creatures. A way to save them ought to be found.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

It is easy to condemn those whom everyone condemns. Let each person think of someone he judged without appeal. What could he say in that person's favour, as Avraham did for Sodom?

The Halt at Haran



PRESENTATION

The departure of Avraham's family for Canaan was first set in motion by his father, Terach. But they stopped on the way, at Haran. The Rav puts words to this halt, and to what it cost those who stayed there.

THE QUESTION

Why not stay at the heart of a great civilisation in order to transform it from within?

THE ANSWER

“They came as far as Haran and settled there” (Bereshit 11:31); “to the sons of the concubines Avraham gave gifts” (Bereshit 25:6).

It seems hardly conceivable that a tiny family could shine its light on all humanity. It seems more reasonable to remain attached to a great power, a great civilisation, and to spread Avraham's spirituality through it by way of education, for a revolution from within.

Yet those who did not make the leap to Canaan, through the movement of *lech lecha*, were condemned to disappearance through assimilation. It is these great movements that swallowed up Avraham's ideals and reduced them to nothing.

That is why Avraham gives gifts to the sons of his concubines: they take what they can take, and that is legitimate. But the core must be preserved in its purity. Letting it go means alienating it through concessions, here and there.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The core must be preserved in its purity.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Where are our “halts at Haran”, the places where we stopped along the way, out of caution or comfort? Let each person name a concession made “here and there”. And what, in his family, is the core that no one touches.

One Sun Rises Before the Other Sets



PRESENTATION

Just after the binding of Yitzhak, and just before Sarah's death, the text breaks off to announce distant births in the family of Nachor, who had remained in Mesopotamia. Avraham is informed as if he had not known before. From this line Rivkah was born.

THE QUESTION

Why is a righteous person's successor born even before that righteous person passes away — and where does a holiness come from that sprouts in a family that had lost it?

THE ANSWER

“The sun rises and the sun sets” (Kohélet 1:5); “Betuel fathered Rivkah” (Bereshit 22:23).

Our Sages teach that before a righteous person passes away, G-d already provides for his succession by another righteous person; the Midrash gives many examples. This is how the world moves forward: each is charged with a mission different from the other's.

The Rav gives a first explanation: the positive acts we perform are not lost in nature. They do not benefit only the person for whom they are done; they spread their force at the level of the whole of creation. The holiness generated by the binding of Yitzhak meant that somewhere, in a distant family, an exceptional being was born, entirely opposed to the outlook of her whole family.

For the house of Nachor had slid into impurity: Betuel became Aramean, though his origin was Hebrew, and he adopted other beliefs. But there was a little girl there, a seed of holiness that had remained pure: Rivkah.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The positive acts we perform are not lost in nature.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We live our losses as endings, for lack of looking at what has already been born elsewhere. Let each person name a good deed whose effects he saw far from where it was done. And what deed this week could give birth to something elsewhere?

Twelve, and a Thirteenth



PRESENTATION

Nachor has eight sons by his wife Milkah and four by his concubine: twelve. The same number appears with Yishmael, and with Yaakov. And beside the twelve, each time, a daughter appears: with Nachor, Rivkah; with Yaakov, Dinah.

THE QUESTION

What does this number twelve mean, and why is a thirteenth, feminine element added to it?

THE ANSWER

“These eight Milkah bore to Nachor” (Bereshit 22:23).

When we analyse the number of children descended from Nachor, from Yaakov or from Yishmael, we find, paradoxically, always this number twelve, on which the months of the year are structured, and which also structures space through its edges.

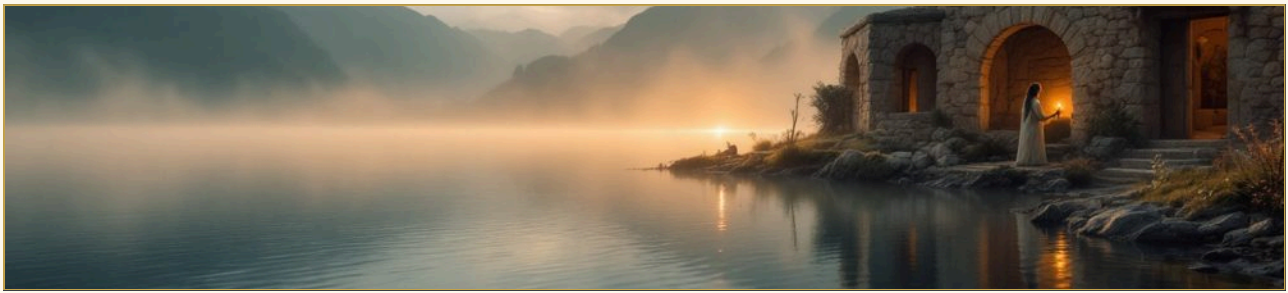
With, each time, the possibility of a thirteenth child, who is feminine. Just as there is a thirteenth month, which restores the balance between the lunar year and the solar year: this thirteenth is not a surplus, it is what keeps the count from drifting.

This feminine element is malchut, kingship: the one who gives man stability. That is why, says the Rav, the verse of the rising sun applies first of all to the feminine: it is Rivkah who comes to bring comfort for the loss of Sarah.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In a neatly ordered count, what holds the whole together is often missing. Who in our family plays the role of the “thirteenth”, the one who keeps the count from drifting? Let each person say who, and why.

What Keeps Man on Earth



PRESENTATION

The feminine, says the Rav, is malchut, kingship, the final setting in the course of development. It does not merely complete man: it keeps him from escaping. To understand this, the Rav goes back to the very reason the world was created.

THE QUESTION

From what does the feminine protect man — and why does the Divine Presence need this junction?

THE ANSWER

“And the spirit of G-d hovered over the face of the waters” (Bereshit 1:2).

It is the woman who gives man stability: with her, he cannot escape into mystical spheres; he remains attached to the reality of this world. She has the art of making the junction between olam hazeh and olam haba.

For the world was created to bring about the Divine Presence on earth, to give real existence to that Divine spirit which hovered over the face of the waters. From now on it will hover over the face of man: it is man who will represent it, as a partner in the covenant with G-d. And this junction does not hold without the feminine.

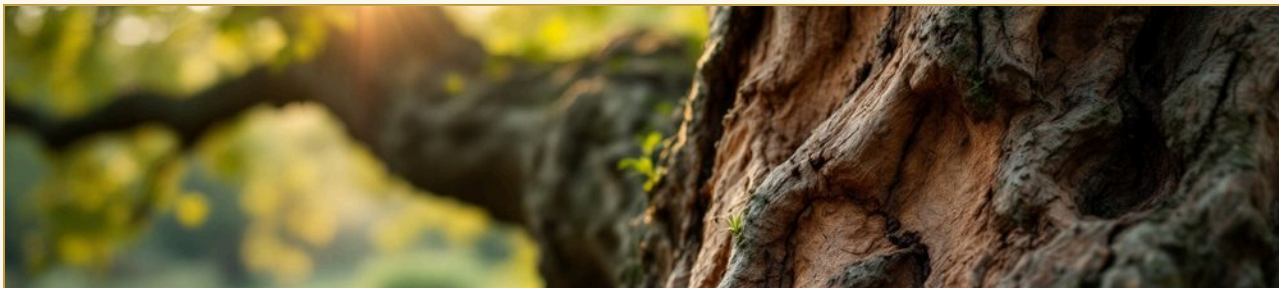
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The world was created to bring about the Divine Presence on earth.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each of us has his ways of escaping: into ideas, screens, grand projects. Who in our life brings us back to the reality of this world? Let each person name that person, and say whether he is grateful or irritated.

The World Only Seems to Decline



PRESENTATION

We often hear that the world is heading toward decline, and that with each generation the level drops. The Rav gives a second explanation of the sun that rises before the other sets, and he takes the opposite view of this pessimism.

THE QUESTION

Is the world really going from bad to worse — or is something growing beneath the surface?

THE ANSWER

People may well say that the world is in decline: the decline is only outward. Holinesses do not break apart; they add up day after day, month after month, year after year, era after era. Over the six millennia, holiness increases. Only the wicked scatter and disintegrate.

Outwardly, one can speak of a decline of the generations. But inwardly, there is an ascent. The Torah of two thousand years ago has only developed, come to greater fulfilment through our generations.

But as holiness is revealed, peels appear that seek to contain it, and this cannot be escaped. That is what happened with Avraham's trial: an enormous portion of holiness shone out across the world, and at the same time the whole rest of creation sought to oppose it.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The decline is only outward; it is not inward.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We readily say “in my day, things were better”. Let each person name something that, in our family or community, has grown from one generation to the next. And a “peel” that today seeks to contain it.

SUBJECT 09

Lost Stars, but Recovered



PRESENTATION

The world, says the Rav, ends up at a dead end, and it is forced to reconsider its course. It is then that, in the very midst of impurity, unexpected beings begin to sprout. Rivkah, born in the house of Betuel the Aramean, is the example.

THE QUESTION

How can purity be born in the very heart of impurity — and why was Rivkah not the mother of the twelve tribes?

THE ANSWER

“Rivkah, daughter of Betuel the Aramean” (Bereshit 25:20).

In the midst of this impurity, gerim begin to sprout, those who convert impurity into purity, and ba'alei teshuvah. The Rav compares them to stars lost in the universe, but not truly lost, since they are recovered. Rivkah is of this order: a seed that remained pure in a house that had lost its way.

She could have been the mother of the twelve children, but she was not: Esav first had to be cleared away; he must not come at the same time as the twelve tribes. Esav and Yishmael will join forces, and the Rav sees in this alliance the negative form of what the people was to become. With Yitzchak, Rivkah forms the couple with whom what follows truly begins.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We are quick to judge a person by his family or background. Let each person think of someone who came “from afar” and taught him something essential. And what is there in us of a lost star waiting to be recovered?

SUBJECT 10

Truth Cast Down to Earth



PRESENTATION

At the moment of creating man, the Midrash relates, Kindness, Truth, Righteousness and Peace held a debate. G-d took Truth and cast it down to the earth. Our Sages asked why He did not cast down Peace, so that it would sprout from the ground.

THE QUESTION

Why cast truth down to earth rather than peace?

THE ANSWER

“Truth will sprout from the earth” (Tehillim 85:12); Bereshit Rabbah 8:5.

Truth imposes itself. With peace, one can play games: one can pretend. With truth, one cannot.

The moment this truth touches the earth, people will become aware of their mistakes. There will be no more way to lie, no more way to deceive. They will correct themselves of their own accord and turn back.

This is how, even when one sinks into error, one does not reach the point of no return: the forces of impurity oppose those of holiness, but something ends up taking things in hand again.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

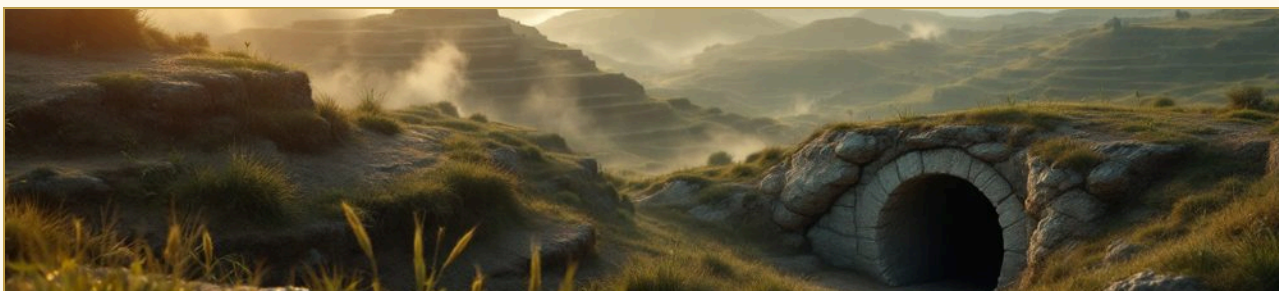
Truth imposes itself.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In a family, people sometimes prefer a peace for show to a truth that disturbs. Let each person name a moment when a truth spoken in the end brought a more solid peace. And a “peace” in our home that holds only because we pretend.

SUBJECT 11

There Is No Final Death



PRESENTATION

Why is Hevron also called Kiryat Arba, the city of the four? This time the Rav answers from the elements of which the human being is made, and from what happens to them in the grave.

THE QUESTION

What becomes of what makes up a being when it dies — and why is the grave a place of beginning?

THE ANSWER

Belief in the resurrection of the dead, the thirteenth of the principles of faith.

The substance of every being returns to its original nature: dust to dust, fire to fire, water to its waters, breath to the spirit. There are four constituent elements, just as there are stages in the development of man, the last of which encompasses the whole. So there is no final death, no total disintegration.

That is why the resurrection of the dead is possible. The grave, the place where the four constituents of life come apart, is also the place where a new combination of life is forged, at a higher level — and this independently of what children and grandchildren achieve in seeking to enrich their parents' legacy.

Kiryat Arba, the city of the four, is the place that has the art of binding them together. And a dead person does not move about, he does not stir: he is there. It is he who confers ownership of the land, and who brings about Hevron, the junction between this world and the next.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

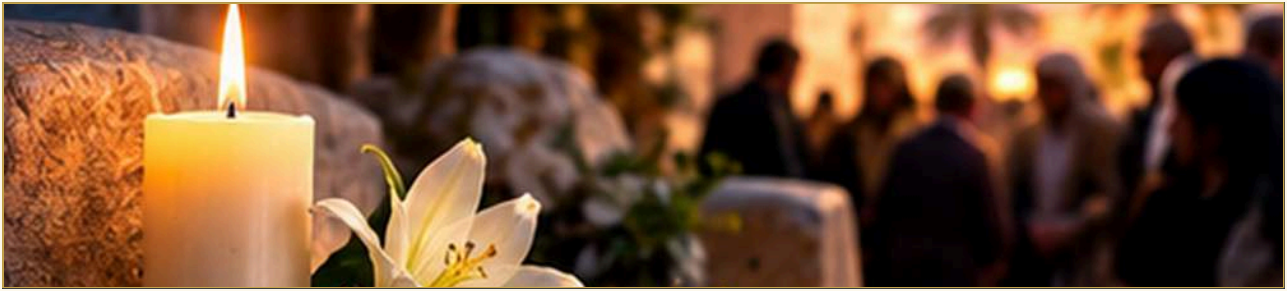
There is no final death; there is no total disintegration.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We often think that what disappears is lost. Let each person think of what a departed one left him that has taken on a new form in him. And what he would like to see “recomposed” in his children rather than simply preserved.

SUBJECT 12

She Was Mourned — a Little



PRESENTATION

Until now, the Torah had never shown a man weeping for a loved one: this is the first time. And in the word “and to weep for her”, the scribes write one letter smaller than the others. The text itself mutes this mourning.

THE QUESTION

Why are Avraham's tears measured — and what exactly do we weep for when we weep for the dead?

THE ANSWER

The kaf of velivkotah, written small (Bereshit 23:2).

There are three sizes of letters in the Torah scroll: ordinary letters, large ones — like the beit of Bereshit — and small ones. Here, in velivkotah, the kaf is written in miniature. The text means: she was wept for, yes, a little. It is hard to part. But she had a life.

What we weep for through death is the void left for those who surrounded the departed, for those who had grown used to him, for those who benefited from all his experience. When a person has fulfilled his life, provided it was positive and precious, there is not much left to say.

The Rav also thinks of those who, still today, fall at the front and sacrifice their lives for peace: those we weep for more, out of solidarity.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

She was wept for, yes, she was wept for a little. She had a life.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What do we really weep for when we lose someone: the person, or what he did for us? Let each person say what a departed loved one gave him that he misses most. And how he could, in turn, give it to others.