

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

CHAYEI SARAH

12 Questions for the Shabbat Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Chayei Sarah — The Death of Sarah, Part 1”: why a parasha that
tells of a death is called “life”, why Avraham refuses a field
offered to him in order to pay for a cave, and why the matriarchs
never knew one another. Up to the tent that lights up again when
Rivkah enters it.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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SUBJECT 01

Why Call the Account of a Death “Life”?



PRESENTATION

The parasha opens with Sarah's passing and her funeral. Yet it is called “the life of Sarah”. The same is true of the one that tells of Yaakov's end, which is called Vayechi, “and he lived”.

THE QUESTION

Why are the two parashiyot that recount the passing of the righteous named after their life?

THE ANSWER

“The righteous, even in their death, are called living” (Berachot 18a).

The wicked, for whom time is dead, are called dead even in their lifetime. And Yaakov? Yaakov still lives, insists the Rav: that is what the title of the parasha means to say.

We are called to live in this world as in a duplex: here below we occupy the lower floor, and the upper floor is the world to come. We go back and forth between the two, which means that in reality one never dies. Death is a necessary eclipse, indispensable for climbing to another rung of life and passing to another vision of the world.

That is why the foundation of faith in Judaism is not so much the Garden of Eden as the resurrection: one does not die, one is called to live again. Passing through death is only a decomposition, like that of the seed in the soil in order to reach another life.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Death is an eclipse, quite simply.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

If our life is a duplex, what in our week already happens “upstairs”? Let each person name a moment when he felt that what he was doing went beyond this world. And how many times a week does he climb the stairs?

SUBJECT 02

A Field or a Cave?



PRESENTATION

Efron offers the field. Avraham refuses the field and wants the cave, and he pays for it. He bargains at length to obtain what apparently is worth less than what he was offered. And so taking possession of the land begins with a burial place.

THE QUESTION

Why refuse a field that is offered in order to buy a burial cave — and why does taking possession of the land begin with a cemetery?

THE ANSWER

In Hebrew the cemetery is called Beit HaChayim, the house of the living.

There are three places in Israel that we paid for with our own money: the Temple Mount, bought from Aravnah the Jebusite; the Cave of Machpelah, bought from Efron; and Shechem, bought by Yaakov. These were not given to us: we acquired them.

An agricultural field can be seized, nationalised at any moment, its status changed, set aside for construction. A cemetery cannot: it remains the property of all who rest there, and those who have buried their own there claim their share in it, because that is where their essence and their origins lie. Efron, whose name evokes dust, sees in it only farmland.

In a Beit HaChayim there is a presence of soul hovering over the graves. True possession of the land is where we have buried our bones, the being that carried the values we brought to light: without this body we could have applied nothing, achieved nothing.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The house of the living is our title deed to the land that was promised to us.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We go into debt for walls, and we do not always know where our great-grandparents rest. Let each person say the name of the oldest ancestor he can name. And what he has that is worth passing on rather than selling.

SUBJECT 03

The First Laughter in the Bible



PRESENTATION

The Torah gives prime importance to the acquisition of Machpelah, and it makes it pass through a woman. The Rav recalls that Sarah is also the first in the Bible to laugh — at ninety, at the announcement of a child.

THE QUESTION

Why did the land have to be acquired for Sarah — and what does her laughter say?

THE ANSWER

“Sarah laughed within herself” (Bereshit 18:12).

The woman is considered the soil of the universe. Why? Because it is she who gives life, she who produces, she who ensures the continuity of the generations. So the land had to be bought for Sarah.

Sarah is the first to laugh: an inner laughter, a laughter that almost mocks the situation she finds herself in — giving birth to a child at ninety. It is not that she does not believe it: the One who created the world can surely work miracles.

And Sarah was not the only one to benefit from this miracle. We are told that Milkah too had a child at ninety, and that Rivkah descends from this birth. That is why the text mentions this family just before telling of Sarah's death.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

When G-d performed the miracle, He let all who were anxiously waiting for a child benefit from it.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

When a miracle happens next door, we rarely think it concerns us. Let each person tell of a joy that came to others and that moved him forward too. And what does he laugh at “within himself”, between doubt and trust?

Every Tragedy Carries a New Sun



PRESENTATION

After the binding, Avraham is filled with remorse: Yitzchak is thirty-seven, and he has not sought a wife for him. Had he had children, he would at least have left descendants. It is then that Avraham is told of a birth in his family.

THE QUESTION

What should we answer someone who regrets what might have been — and should we speak of irreplaceable people?

THE ANSWER

Rashi on Bereshit 22:20: Avraham's remorse on returning from Mount Moriah.

Why did I leave my child until thirty-seven without finding him a wife? Avraham says to himself. He would have had children; had I then been asked to carry him onto the altar, he would at least have had descendants. The answer comes in the form of news: this trial you went through has opened a new path.

We must not be alarmed by the tragedies we live through. Every tragedy carries within it a new sun, and G-d allows Himself to put out a sun only when He has already provided for the rising, the dawn of a new event. This is borne out throughout history.

So we must not speak of irreplaceable people, nor give ourselves over to endless mourning for those who leave us. Here, this new sun is the birth of Rivkah.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

There is always something else, a new sun being prepared.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We all brood over an “if only I had...”. Let each person name one aloud. And let him look, with the help of the table, for the sun that has risen since, perhaps without his noticing.

Does a People Need a Land?



PRESENTATION

Rivkah is born into the family of Nachor, Avraham's brother. The Rav pauses over the three sons of Terach — Avraham, Nachor and Haran — and over three ways of conceiving a people's future: with a land, without a land, or scattered throughout the world.

THE QUESTION

Why is Avraham the only one of the three brothers to want a land for his descendants?

THE ANSWER

To be sure of what one builds, of what one leaves behind, one always needs a portion of land. A people without a land is exposed to every wind. Others, on the contrary, see in it the origin of divisions and inequalities: the universe would belong to everyone, and the emphasis should be placed on social struggle. Nachor leans somewhat toward this cosmopolitan tendency.

A current of thought has also held that the vocation of the Jewish people was to spread the word of G-d through exile: the land would then have only a secondary place, and exile a positive meaning. Haran threw himself into the furnace and did not come out; Avraham came out, because he was determined to go all the way.

Nachor, who leaned toward cohabitation, ends up Aramean: he lost his identity, he is no longer an Ivri. And yet it is in his family that the new sun dawns: Rivkah, who will join Yitzchak.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

A people without a land is uprooted; it is exposed to every wind.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Where are our roots: a place, a house, a language, a table? Let each person say what leaves him “exposed to every wind” when he is far from them. And what it would take for his children to feel rooted.

The Woman Must Come



PRESENTATION

Avraham sends his servant Eliezer to find a wife for Yitzchak. The servant asks a practical question: and if the woman does not want to follow me, must I take your son back there? Avraham's answer is an oath.

THE QUESTION

Why must Yitzchak on no account go to Rivkah — and why is it for her to come?

THE ANSWER

“Only, do not take my son back there” (Bereshit 24:8).

Avraham makes Eliezer swear not to take his son there. The woman must absolutely change course, and regard the land of Israel as essential to pursuing Avraham's goals, according to the will of G-d.

And that is what happens: Rivkah is aware of it, and she joins Yitzchak. The foundation of their union is first of all the will to build their home in Israel.

That is why Sarah's burial receives priority: it is like the charter, the title deed to the promised land, which the marriage of Yitzchak and Rivkah will come to confirm. And when Eliezer returns with Rivkah, he finds Yitzchak in the field — the one where his mother was buried.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The woman must absolutely change course and regard Israel as essential to pursuing Avraham's goals.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In a couple, each takes steps toward the other — but some points are not negotiable. Let each person say what, for his family, is the “land” from which there is no retreat. And what step he was ready to take to join the other.

Two Queens in One Home



PRESENTATION

The patriarchs knew one another: Yitzchak lived in his father's lifetime, Yaakov in his grandfather's. The matriarchs never did: Rivkah did not know Sarah, Rachel and Leah did not know Rivkah. One may smile: they had no mother-in-law problems.

THE QUESTION

Why did the mothers of Israel never meet, when the fathers lived together?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “The woman is kingship; the woman is the queen of the home.”

The essential reason lies elsewhere. The woman is malchut, kingship; she is the queen of the home. And one cannot have two queens in one home: there is only one. As long as Sarah is there, there is no room for Rivkah; when Rivkah is there, there is none for the next, and so on.

The other qualities can live side by side: strictness, gevurah, can go with kindness, chessed. But not malchut: malchut is a culmination; it is not shared. That is where the praise of the woman of valour is well deserved by the feminine.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

One cannot have two queens in one home; there is only one queen.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In our homes, who “reigns” over what — the table, the calendar, the atmosphere? Let each person say where he had to make way for another, or take his place. And how can we hand over without fighting over the crown?

SUBJECT 08

How Many Years Truly Lived?



PRESENTATION

The Rav tells the story of a rabbi being considered to succeed the spiritual leader of a community. Coming ahead to look around, he first asks to see the cemetery, to check that it is surrounded with respect. There he finds strange inscriptions.

THE QUESTION

If the number of days we truly lived were engraved on our tombstone, what would remain?

THE ANSWER

Here lies so-and-so, who lived five years; beside him, another, twelve years; yet another, three years. It is explained to him: at the end of a life, a balance is drawn up for the person — how much time he devoted to the community, what he gave, what he lived. That amount is inscribed; on the other days, he was absent.

And indeed, when we analyse the course of our life, how much dead time is there in it? How often are we truly equal to our duties? It is a problem, the Rav acknowledges.

What sets apart the patriarchs and matriarchs who rest in Machpelah is that they lived their whole life twice over. They did not lose their days; they carried them with them.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Their life was not torn; their life was not cut short by a few weeks or a few months.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

If our stone bore the number of our days truly given, what would remain? Let each person estimate, honestly, how many days of the past week would count. And what he could do tomorrow to add one.

The Cemetery of Couples



PRESENTATION

Machpelah means what is double, folded in two. The first to be buried there was Adam, with his wife: the first couple, the foundation of humanity, who bore within them the image of G-d. Rashi relates that the city of the four also owes its name to the couples who rest there.

THE QUESTION

Why do the patriarchs and their wives rest in a cave “folded in two”?

THE ANSWER

Rashi on Bereshit 23:2: four couples, Adam and Chavah, Avraham and Sarah, Yitzchak and Rivkah, Yaakov and Leah.

Machpelah is the cemetery of couples, of perfect couples. And it earned this title because there a man managed to fold himself in two, throughout his life, to answer the needs of the other, the call of the other.

The Rav also notes that the numerical value of the word Machpelah is one hundred and seventy-five: that was the number of the years of Avraham's life.

The patriarchs and matriarchs who rest there set the example of a harmonious life. It did not seem perfect, the Rav specifies: it was.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

A man managed to fold himself in two to answer the needs of the other, the call of the other.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

For whom, this year, has each of us truly folded himself in two? Let each person name, without false modesty, a need of the other he answered. And the call he has not yet heard.

SUBJECT 10

The Lamb That Ran Away



PRESENTATION

How did Avraham know this cave? Our Sages relate that he discovered it the day when, having opened his house to guests, he wanted to slaughter a lamb in their honour — and the animal ran away.

THE QUESTION

Why is the cave of the patriarchs discovered by running after a lamb meant for guests?

THE ANSWER

The midrash of the escaped lamb, which Avraham catches up with in the cave.

He ran after it and caught up with it in the Me'arat HaMachpelah. That is where he discovered the place.

What does this mean? That it was Avraham's openness, his kindness turned toward others, that gave this place its own value. It is what makes it holy. Our Sages say that in this cave lies the cornerstone of the ownership of the land of Israel — and it was a meal offered to guests that brought it to light.

And that is why Hevron remains to this day a place not only of contemplation but of identity for the Jewish people, because the patriarchs are gathered there. It is also, for all religions, a place of spiritual renewal.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It was Avraham's openness, through kindness toward others, that gave this place its own value.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We look for what grounds our place, and we look for it everywhere but in hospitality. Let each recall something important he discovered while doing someone a service. And what he refuses to offer right now, for lack of time.

SUBJECT 11

For the Dead or for the Living?



PRESENTATION

Avraham comes to eulogise Sarah and to weep for her. The Rav pauses over a question that has always been asked: are the funeral and the eulogy an honour paid to the departed, or a message addressed to those who remain?

THE QUESTION

To whom is a eulogy addressed: to the one who has gone, or to those who remain?

THE ANSWER

“Avraham came to eulogise Sarah and to weep for her” (Bereshit 23:2).

It is an honour paid to the living. They are told: see this person who was with us an hour, two hours ago, with all his energies, and who has become inert matter. Know that he did this and that, and that we must take over. He should be held up somewhat as an example.

But it is also a tribute to the one we have lost, and that is just as true. For we do not always realise what each person's reach was in the family, in the community, what he fought for, what he achieved in life.

That is the lesson Avraham gives us by eulogising his wife before burying her, while weeping for her, in proportion.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We only ever have samples; we do not have an overall view.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We praise people when they can no longer hear it. Let each person say aloud, tonight, what he admires in someone close to him sitting at this table. And why had he never told him?

SUBJECT 12

Yitzchak's Silence



PRESENTATION

Avraham eulogises Sarah and weeps for her. Of Yitzchak, on the other hand, we know nothing: we do not see him mourn his mother. The text will find him again only at the end of the next chapter, comforted.

THE QUESTION

Why does the son not weep for his mother — and what, in the end, comforts him?

THE ANSWER

“Yitzchak brought her into the tent of Sarah his mother... and Yitzchak was comforted after his mother” (Bereshit 24:67).

Yitzchak is traumatised by this loss, whose cause is known. Sarah had not been told of the binding. The Satan took on Yitzchak's appearance and came to tell his mother that his father had almost slaughtered him. A mother's heart could not bear it: she let out a cry of terror, and she died.

Yitzchak will recover only on the day he discovers Rivkah and brings her into his mother's tent. Then the light Sarah kindled from Shabbat to Shabbat shines again, a cloud of holiness returns to the tent, and the dough kneaded by Rivkah takes on again the form of the dough blessed by Sarah's hands.

It is at that moment that Yitzchak becomes attached, he who had given up loving anything at all, so strict had he become. He lets himself be loved, and he is comforted.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In every family there is a trial no one speaks of, and which weighs on everyone. Who at this table carries something he has never told? And what in a home can rekindle the light: a word, a meal, a presence?