

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 2)”: why Avraham pays for a land already promised to him, why the Torah links Efron's field to the acquisition of a wife, and why the evil inclination looks less like an appetite than like indecision. Up to the four hundred shekels, and a beauty that wears no make-up.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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SUBJECT 01

Paying for What Is Already Promised



PRESENTATION

The land was promised to Avraham; virtually, it already belongs to his descendants. Yet to bury Sarah, he takes pains to acquire the Cave of Machpelah with his own money. The Rav makes this investment the question of the chapter.

THE QUESTION

Why pay for a land already promised — and what exactly is a “house” for the dead for?

THE ANSWER

“Let him give it to me for its full price, as a burial holding” (Bereshit 23:9).

If this land must be conquered, why not invest oneself in it? Invest oneself, because it matters. Paying, here, is not buying back a disputed right: it is committing something of oneself to what was as yet only a word.

We do not have a cult of the dead. But the cemetery is called Beit HaChayim: the house of the living, the residence of the living in the past. Such a house is needed only to bear witness to the past of people who contributed to the history of humanity, and who took in a two-storey life: *olam hazeh* and *olam haba*.

That is why Machpelah is the refuge of those to whom G-d gave a taste, already in this world, of the world to come — Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov — and whom He spared from the *yetzer hara*.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The cemetery is the house of the living, the residence of the living in the past.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We gladly pay for what gives us pleasure, less readily for what is already “owed” to us. Let each person name something promised — a relationship, an inheritance, a place — in which he still ought to invest himself. What would he be ready to pay to truly deserve it?

SUBJECT 02

The Evil Inclination Is Indecision



PRESENTATION

These patriarchs, says the Rav, were spared the yetzer hara. It is always translated as the evil inclination, and everyone thinks he knows, crudely, what it is. The Rav proposes an entirely different definition.

THE QUESTION

What if the evil inclination were not first an appetite, but the inability to choose?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “The evil inclination is what keeps you torn between several possibilities.”

In reality, the evil inclination is what keeps you torn between several possibilities, several paths, without your having yet chosen any of them. You are in a trial period: you taste a little of this branch, a little of that one.

What results is a fragmented life, like those calendar pages one tears off as one goes. Whereas in reality this life should be a harmonious life, a life that gathers all its possibilities into itself instead of scattering them.

That is why, the Rav continues, the Torah establishes a link between the acquisition of Machpelah and the acquisition of a wife: in both cases, it is about leaving indecision behind in order to commit.

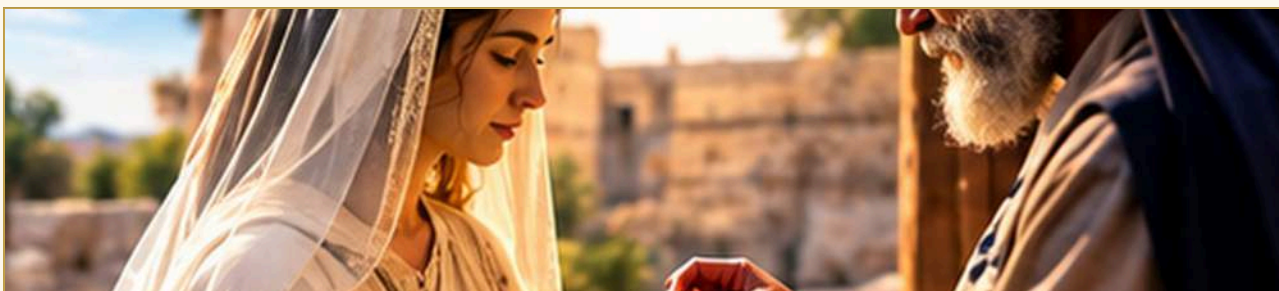
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

This life should be a harmonious life, a life that gathers all its possibilities into itself.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Where does each of us taste everything without choosing anything: studies, projects, friendships, commitments? Let each person name a decision he has been putting off for a long time. And what he would gain by making it, even at the cost of giving up something else.

Acquiring a Wife as One Acquires a Field



PRESENTATION

The verse that founds marriage does not say “when a man marries”, but “when a man takes a wife”. It uses a verb of acquisition, the same one used for Efron’s field. This may sound wrong.

THE QUESTION

Why does the Torah bring the acquisition of a wife close to that of Sarah’s burial cave?

THE ANSWER

“When a man takes a wife” (Devarim 24:1); the same verb as for Efron’s field.

Don’t jump to conclusions, warns the Rav, by saying that acquiring a wife is the equivalent of a burial place: it is the opposite. As long as we have not discovered the woman and acquired her, we remain in raw matter. It offers a great many possibilities, but it has settled on no purpose: it has received no form.

Yet the one invested in the world of reality, of practice, of giving life its form, is the feminine: it is the feminine that creates, that generates life. It is the feminine that offers man the possibility of fulfilling himself in his future world and of doubling himself.

The man brings raw matter from his field, wheat or cotton; she makes it into food, a garment. She transforms it, she gives it form. This is the tribute Avraham pays Sarah by laying her in Machpelah, where the first man and his wife Chavah already rested.

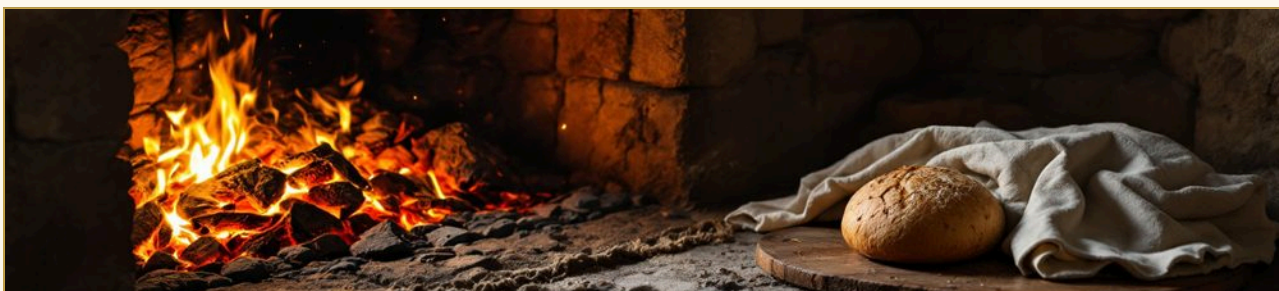
THE RAV’S CONCLUSION

As long as we have not discovered the woman and acquired her, we remain in matter, like raw matter.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In a couple, who gives form to what? Let each person name something raw he brought home that the other transformed. And what he himself received in a raw state and knew how to shape.

A Eulogy Drawn from Proverbs



PRESENTATION

When Avraham eulogises his wife, our Sages say he did so with the conclusion of the book of Mishlei, the “woman of valour”. Yet this whole book is a series of counsels given to man. The Rav reads a surprising passage from it.

THE QUESTION

Why eulogise a wife with a book that mainly warns man?

THE ANSWER

“For a harlot, one is brought down to a loaf of bread... Can a man take fire into his bosom and his clothes not be burned?” (Mishlei 6:26-27).

Throughout, Mishlei lavishes its counsels on man so that he will not remain in the state of raw matter. The Rav reads a passage: you will be protected from the wicked woman, from the smooth tongue of the stranger; do not covet her beauty in your heart, do not let yourself be caught by her seduction.

The failure in question there is always the same: that man remains in the realm of his many possibilities. Whoever lets himself be drawn from every side has chosen nothing, and may end up brought down to a loaf of bread.

Sarah's eulogy therefore takes up the conclusion of the whole book: the woman of valour is the one through whom man leaves raw matter behind. Avraham knows it, and it is with all the respect due to a woman of virtue that he sees to the way she is buried.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The failure lies in man remaining in the realm of his many possibilities.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Proverbs warns against what seduces from every side. Let each person name a “seduction” that keeps him from choosing today. And who in his life helped him leave raw matter behind?

A Man the Size of the Universe



PRESENTATION

Our masters say that when G-d created the first man, he extended from one end of the universe to the other. The Rav reads this Midrash in three dimensions: space, time, and the precepts that give a life its structure.

THE QUESTION

What does it mean to fulfil a life, if man has the measure of space and time?

THE ANSWER

613 mitzvot: 365 prohibitions like the days of the solar year, 248 positive commandments like the limbs of man (Makkot 23b).

In space, Adam was the size of the universe, from one end to the other: space is on a human scale. In time too, he extended from one end to the other, from the beginning to the end. And he himself had the dimension of the precepts that guide his life and give it structure.

These mitzvot, six hundred and thirteen in number, are divided as follows: three hundred and sixty-five prohibitions, like the days of the year — each day comes with its prohibition, its warning — and two hundred and forty-eight positive actions, whose number is the equivalent of the very structure of man.

So what is it to fulfil a life? It is when one has taken this human time and this human space into account, and made of them a reality for the world to come.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Fulfilling a life is when one has taken this human time, this human space, into account, and made of them a reality in the world to come.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each day has its “warning”, says the Rav. Let each person name the one of his day: what he managed not to do. And the positive action that this week mobilised his whole being, from his hands to his heart.

Old, or Wise?



PRESENTATION

The text says of Avraham that he was *zaken*, old, and “come into days”: he had not lost a single day, he had banished none. Our Sages read in the word *zaken*: *zeh kanah chochmah*, this one has acquired wisdom.

THE QUESTION

How does one recognize a wise man — and why is old age not enough?

THE ANSWER

“Avraham was old, come into days” (Bereshit 24:1); *zaken*, “one who has acquired wisdom” (Kiddushin 32b).

Three definitions answer one another. Wise is he who knows his place: who does not seek to take another’s place, nor to defy his own capacities, who fulfills himself according to his aptitudes and gives them their full reality.

Wise, next, is he who projects himself into the future: who weighs the consequences of his actions and analyses the repercussions of his commitments.

Wise, finally, is he who seeks to learn from every man: who has neither disdain nor contempt for anyone, because he knows that each person can give him a new light.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Avraham is the one who acquired these three facets of wisdom, and that is how he carried his days.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Of the three — knowing one’s place, seeing the consequences, learning from every man — which do we lack most? Let each answer for himself. And let him say from whom, this year, he refused to learn something.

Blessed “in Everything”



PRESENTATION

“The L-rd had blessed Avraham in everything”, bakol. In the Grace after Meals, we ask to be blessed as our patriarchs were: Avraham bakol, Yitzchak mikol, Yaakov kol. The word “everything” comes back three times.

THE QUESTION

What is it to be blessed “in everything” — and why does this blessing introduce the choice of Yitzchak's wife?

THE ANSWER

“And the L-rd had blessed Avraham in everything” (Bereshit 24:1).

These three patriarchs are the ones who were granted, already in this world, the world to come. And this “everything” says something precise: bringing all the possibilities at our disposal back to one point, to a perfect unity. That is kingship, malchut.

Yet this work is impossible without the feminine. Some go so far as to read in this bakol the name of a daughter Avraham is said to have had. Be that as it may, this verse serves as the introduction to the choice of Yitzchak's one wife.

The Rav returns to it at the end of the lecture: fulfillment means grouping, fusing this set of possibilities into a single one. That is what Avraham does, and by that very act he attests to the future ownership of the land.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

This work is impossible without the feminine.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Bakol, mikol, kol: we recite it at every birkat hamazon. Let each person say, in one word, what gives his life unity across all his activities. And if he cannot find it, who around the table helps him bring them together?

SUBJECT 08

Money and Longing



PRESENTATION

In Hebrew, silver, money, is kesef — and desire, longing, are expressed by the same word. And one marries with a coin of little value. The Rav connects these two facts to the purchase of Efron's field.

THE QUESTION

Why does money bear the name of desire — and what does it mean to marry with a coin worth almost nothing?

THE ANSWER

“My soul longs, nichsefah, and even pines for the courts of the L-rd” (Tehillim 84:3).

Take someone who has a lot of money and does not invest it: as long as he keeps it, this money offers him many possibilities. When he chooses to invest it in a specific enterprise, he gives it a form, a direction: he has buried all the other possibilities in a single one. That is life.

Kesef, silver, is the means, the coin with which one buys gold; one does not buy silver with gold. It represents the many possibilities at our disposal, and when we want to give them stability, we choose gold. It is a process that puts desire and will to the test.

So let us not be surprised that a wife is acquired with something worth a few shekels, almost nothing. It is a way of saying: it is my many possibilities that lead me to choose you, and I am ready to pay any price, with all my money.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

I consider you the precious jewel of my life.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Where is our “money” — our possibilities, our time, our talents — lying idle without being invested? Let each person name a commitment in which he staked everything. And whether he feels longing for the roads he did not take.

Stranger and Resident



PRESENTATION

Before the children of Chet, Avraham presents himself with a double status: *ger vetoshav*, “a stranger and a resident”. The Rav reads this formula as a programme for life, and connects it to the way Hebrew counts days and years.

THE QUESTION

How can one be both a stranger and a citizen — and what does “gathering the message of each day” mean?

THE ANSWER

“I am a stranger and a resident among you” (Bereshit 23:4).

Ger vetoshav: I keep the status of a stranger, I am searching for an identity, but at the same time I want to be a full citizen. Being a *ger* is my way of wanting, day after day, to gather the message of the day. It is not repeating things, it is discovering what each day brings that is new.

General culture counts age in springs: I am twenty springs old, thirty springs. And what do we call our youth? *Yemei chorpi*, the days of my winter. It is in winter that everything was sown and the seed dies under the earth: what interests us is maturity, the way it comes about. Nothing is acquired once and for all.

As for the children of Chet, their name evokes what is cracked, broken, like the arrows of the mighty that do not reach their target. That is what sometimes happens to us when we undertake several things at once.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Nothing is acquired once and for all; each year requires a new harvest.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In what way are we “strangers” where we live, and in what way full citizens? Let each person say what new thing he learned today, instead of repeating it. And what he sowed “in winter” that is beginning to ripen.

SUBJECT 10

Milk and Honey



PRESENTATION

The land of Israel is described as “flowing with milk and honey”. The Rav pauses over these two foods: both come from something impure, and yet both are permitted to eat.

THE QUESTION

Why is the promised land described by two foods that come from the impure — and what does this have to do with the purchase of Machpelah?

THE ANSWER

“A land flowing with milk and honey” (Shemot 3:8).

Milk comes from blood, and honey from an impure insect, the bee. And yet both are permitted to eat. What was blood, what was insect, has become a food that contributes to the balance of man's health.

That is the meaning of the acquisition of the Me'arat HaMachpelah: taking raw material as it comes, and transforming it into something that nourishes. The Rav connects it to the destiny of the Jewish people, even in the midst of the nations: our relationship with the world is to buy from it all its possibilities, the raw matter, and give it a form, a reality on the scale of creation and of time.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What have we received “in a raw state” — a difficult character, a trial, a complicated inheritance — that could become food? Let each person name something he thought worthless and which in the end nourished him.

SUBJECT 11

Four Hundred Shekels



PRESENTATION

Avraham weighs out four hundred shekels of silver to Efron. This price has received several commentaries. The Rav connects it to the number four, and to what the Torah calls Kiryat Arba, the city of the four.

THE QUESTION

What does Avraham really redeem with these four hundred shekels?

THE ANSWER

“Four hundred shekels of silver, current with the merchant” (Bereshit 23:16).

That is where all the energies of creation are gathered: water, fire, dust and air — the raw materials that surround the world.

Of course, they can go astray. Dust toward laziness and letting oneself go; fire toward passions and desires; air toward empty words and slander. Each carries within it its possible fall.

By acquiring the field and the cave, Avraham gives these energies their purpose. The field and the cave “rise up”, says the text, to become his property: what was redeemed is these energies themselves.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Of these four energies — water, fire, dust, air — which one dominates in our home? Let each person say where it risks going astray: laziness, passion, easy talk. And to what he could devote it this week.

SUBJECT 12

A Beauty That Wears No Make-Up



PRESENTATION

The parasha should have been called “the death of Sarah”. It is called “the life of Sarah”: it is at the end of a life that one can take its full account. And our Sages say that at twenty, Sarah had the beauty of a seven-year-old child.

THE QUESTION

What beauty does the Torah admire in Sarah, and why does it compare it to that of a child?

THE ANSWER

Rashi on Bereshit 23:1: at twenty, she was as beautiful as at seven.

Why the beauty of seven rather than that of twenty? At twenty, there is already make-up, already giving another style to one's own beauty. The beauty of a seven-year-old child is entirely natural; it remains in its natural state.

And what is this beauty? It is inner beauty, a beauty that in a sense completes a whole. It has not been relegated to a corner: it holds together with everything we want to be real. It is there that Sarah proved that her whole life formed a harmonious whole.

That is what the L-rd values, says the Rav: the days of those who did not grow up with fixed, frozen principles. And that is why Machpelah becomes a house of the living, and not a field of graves.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The beauty of a seven-year-old is entirely natural; it remains in its natural state.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Let each person say what, in another member of the family, is beautiful “without make-up”: a quality he never tried to show. And what we ourselves have relegated to a corner, instead of letting it hold together with all the rest.