

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

CHAYEI SARAH

12 Questions for the Shabbat Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Chayei Sarah: The Source of Life”: why the Torah dwells on
Sarah's death and calls it “life”, what separates time lived from
dead time, and what man knows of death that the animal does not.
Up to Hevron, the city of the four, where the stone laid on the
grave becomes a building stone.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

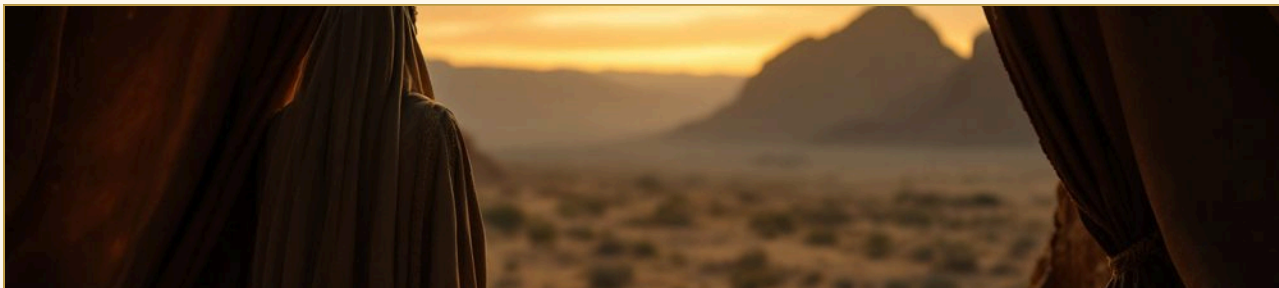
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Themes for reflection and questions to share around the table on Chayei Sarah

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SUBJECT 01

Why Sarah's Death, and Not Avraham's?



PRESENTATION

Until now, every death has passed almost unnoticed in the Torah. Sarah's is told on the very first page and gives the section its title — a title that speaks of life. The Torah will not dwell as long on the death of Avraham, nor on that of Yitzchak or Yaakov.

THE QUESTION

Why is it through the death of a woman, Sarah, that the Torah chooses to say what the passage from one world to the other is?

THE ANSWER

“And these were the years of the life of Sarah” (Bereshit 23:1).

The loss of a wife deserves that we pause over it, says the Rav: it is she who truly allows us to realise our own life and bring it from the virtual to the real. The title already says it: life and death are not two realities opposed to each other.

For it is the feminine that carries the power of creation, ko'ach hayetzirah. Through it, this world and the world to come are embodied in a single being. When a listener asks what, in turn, connects the woman, the Rav answers that the feminine is an entity sufficient unto itself, which is not the case of the masculine: this capacity is already inscribed in her being.

She is also the one who brings forth the coming generation, that portion of oneself called to take over and complete the work. “However much you may want to, it is not you who will carry it.” Sarah, the princess in the universal sense, is therefore the one through whom the text can say what the passage from one world to the other is.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Life and death are not different from each other.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Who in our home brings our projects from the virtual to the real? Let each person name one thing he only wanted, and that someone else made real. And did he ever thank that person for it?

A Hundred Years, Twenty Years, Seven Years



PRESENTATION

The text does not say that Sarah lived a hundred and twenty-seven years. It counts three entities: a hundred years, twenty years, seven years — and then repeats: these were the years of the life of Sarah. For the Rav, the first idea is already here: there is not one single life, but two parallel lives.

THE QUESTION

Why count a life in segments, instead of simply giving the total?

THE ANSWER

Rashi on Bereshit 23:1: each number is explained on its own; “the L-rd knows the days of the wholehearted” (Tehillim 37:18).

A hundred years is not longevity, it is a quality of life: one has shed all the physical and biological barriers of the being, and only the spirit still shines. That is why a light is lit at the bedside of the deceased: we replace life with a light.

Twenty years is the stage of struggle and challenges, the age when the young person takes on his responsibilities: until then, extenuating circumstances can be found for him. And seven years is the moment when the child opens up to the beauty of the world — an element not to be neglected, the beauty of this universe.

Sarah was all of this together. These are not pages torn off the calendar because they are out of date: we kept them, because each page has its message. Together they form a very beautiful necklace. That is the meaning of the verse: the L-rd knows the days of those who care for integrity, completeness, the harmonious whole.

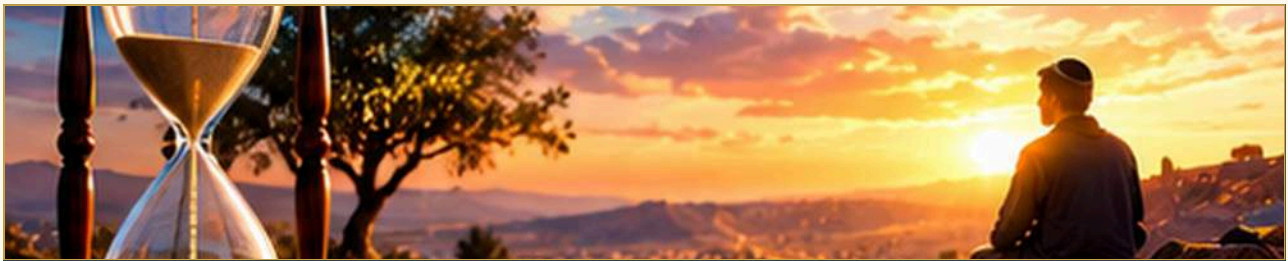
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is not a torn life, it is a complete life.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each of us has broken with someone he once was: the wonder-struck seven-year-old, the twenty-year-old who took up challenges. Let each person say what he left behind along the way and ought to take up again. Is our life a necklace, or torn-off pages?

Making One's Days, or Filling Them



PRESENTATION

The righteous, say our Sages, make their days. The wicked fill their days: there is time to kill, this time weighs on them, it must be filled. A listener pushes the Rav further: if Sarah's hundred and twenty-seven years were full, was there then no dead time at all?

THE QUESTION

Is an hour spent peeling vegetables dead time — and what gives life to the time that passes?

THE ANSWER

There is a time that flees and cannot be caught up. And there is a time in the absolute, called eternity, which is never lost: a fragment of that time is all of time, and all of time is a fragment of that time. In the life of every being there are these two coordinates: dead time and living time. The ideal is to reduce dead time to a minimum.

Today, notes the Rav, a computer helps us understand this phenomenon: information, a memory, is kept in a cloud, and transferred from one device to another. What we found hard to imagine about the hereafter becomes a little less so.

But preparing bread is not dead time. Peeling vegetables is not dead time. Baking pastries, with all their complications, because one wants to create, is not dead time: these moments fit into a purpose. The same is true of a life, where some times prepare others: it is the result that counts.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is the purpose that gives life to all the dead times.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Let each person name the humblest task of his week and say what purpose it is connected to. And what he does each day that is connected to nothing: should it be dropped, or given a meaning?

More Than Intelligence: Giving



PRESENTATION

Man was formed from two elements: the dust of the earth, which returns to dust, and a breath of life breathed in from above. The Rav pauses over what in him comes from the earth — and which man shares with the animals far more than one might think.

THE QUESTION

If it is not intelligence, what truly distinguishes man from the animal?

THE ANSWER

“The serpent was more cunning than all the beasts of the field” (Bereshit 3:1); “and man became a living soul” (Bereshit 2:7).

Intelligence we are born with: it is in our genes, more or less developed, and we share it with the animals, as we share their sensitivity. It is the nachash, the serpent, that the Torah calls the most cunning of the beasts of the field: intelligence that merges with cunning, the quickness of mind given to man by nature, human rationality.

What places us beyond the animal is the capacity to give. It is not in man's nature; it lies in going beyond his own nature. G-d had to intervene to tear man away from the world of the natural and give him a dimension of the beyond, by breathing life into him: man became a living soul, and thus more than the nachash.

As long as this rationality is not accompanied by chessed, the capacity to give and to go beyond oneself, there is no likeness, no image of G-d in man.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

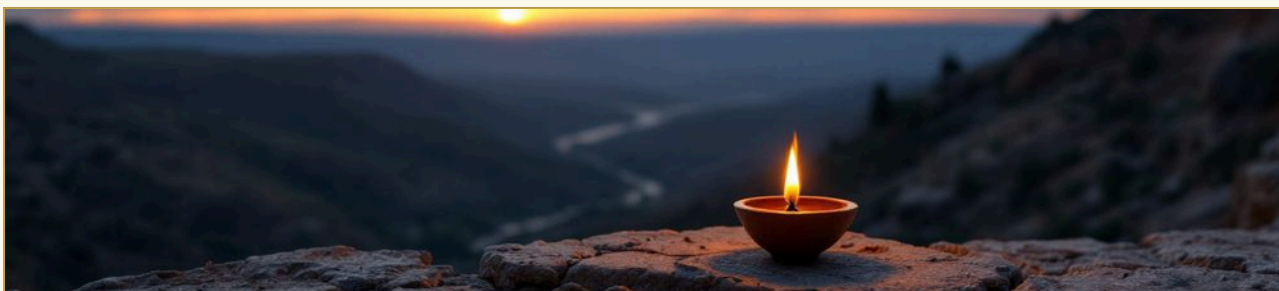
The capacity to give is not in man's nature; it lies in going beyond his own nature.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We admire intelligence and quickness in our children. Let each person tell of an act of giving that impressed him more than a brilliant success. And which of our talents is still a “serpent”, as long as it serves only ourselves?

SUBJECT 05

What Does Man Know That the Animal Does Not?



PRESENTATION

Only man, says the Rav, is conscious of death. A listener objects: animals sense their end approaching, they withdraw, they flee whoever wants to slaughter them. The Rav holds his position, and clarifies what he means.

THE QUESTION

What is the consciousness of death, if it is not the foreboding of one's end?

THE ANSWER

“He will swallow up death forever” (Yeshayahu 25:8).

Losing one's strength and finally giving everything up — that is not the consciousness of death. The consciousness of death is wanting to go beyond it: thinking of it as an accident in life, a tragedy, but one called to be overcome, in order to reach a world where death does not exist.

If man were to live for a certain time and then disappear, what game would the Creator be playing? And without purpose, would life be worth living? Death is the possibility of dismantling a worn-out device that has come to the end, in order to rebuild it and give it another dimension of life. This is the definition of *chayim*, a word in the dual: the meeting of two worlds, the one here below and the one above.

It is this consciousness that keeps us from sinking into despair and telling ourselves: since we are going to die, nothing is worth suffering for or holding back for; we may as well live it up.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The consciousness of death is wanting to go beyond it.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We avoid talking about death at the table. Let each person say what in his life deserves to be overcome rather than endured. And what he would do differently if he truly believed his life had a sequel.

Kaddish Is Not an Amulet



PRESENTATION

Many recite Kaddish for a departed loved one as one would wear a kamea, an amulet. The Rav does not belittle this practice, but he recalls where this prayer comes from and what it commits the one who says it to.

THE QUESTION

What does the one who recites Kaddish for a departed parent really say?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “From today on, I am going to take the place of this loved one.”

Until the twelfth century, the Rav explains, Kaddish was part of the prayer service. It separated its four levels — just as there are four levels of interpreting the text, and four levels of death. The sanctification of the Divine name served as a dividing leaf when passing from one mode of prayer to another.

Later, it was instituted to be recited for a loved one. Its meaning is this: the one we had has gone, and we lack an energy to complete the work, to rebuild our plan and carry it through. I recite Kaddish because from today on I am going to take the place of this loved one, and, as he did, sanctify the Divine name.

Does everyone sanctify the Divine name? It is not for us to judge, answers the Rav. G-d created a world of such variety that each is called to take on his mission. In every painting there is the accessory and the essential, but the accessory matters for the beauty and the very unity of the painting.

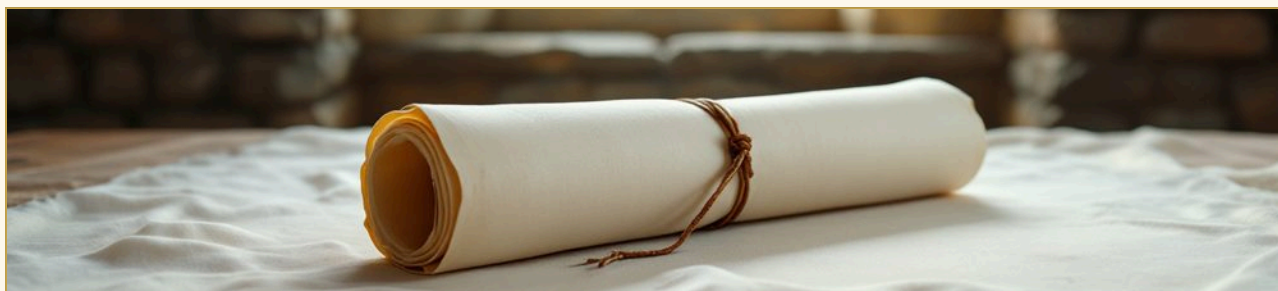
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

When one recites Kaddish for a loved one, one is there to complete his mission, to fulfil what he can no longer do today.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each of us has lost someone who did something no one does anymore. Let each person name that thing. And who around this table would agree to take it up?

Why Is the Written Torah Silent About the World to Come?



PRESENTATION

Our Sages said that whoever denies that the resurrection of the dead comes from the Torah has no share in the world to come. Yet in the written text nothing is seen: the Torah does not speak explicitly of *olam haba*. A listener is surprised: was not everything created through the letters?

THE QUESTION

Why could the world to come not be enclosed in a written text?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “What is most sacred in the writing of a *Sefer Torah* is the white space that surrounds the letter.”

The world to come is the memory of the whole universe, able to bring lives back into circulation: this is what is called the resurrection of the dead. But it cannot be enclosed in a book. It belongs to orality, to permanent becoming. What is written is *olam hazeh*, this world, which one can handle and work on. If the written Torah does not mention it, it is because it does not want to strangle this notion in the book: it leaves it beyond writing.

There are two ways of holding a book: as a closed book, interpreted literally, or as an open text. What matters most in a scroll is not the letter, nor the tag, the flourish above it, nor the *ta'am*, the way it is chanted. It is the white space around it, that white where nothing is written and everything remains to be discovered.

The same caution applies to the oral teaching: it must be placed in its context, and the texts must not be stuck on literally, like a label on a bottle.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Life lies beyond writing.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We like ready-made answers that can be quoted and stuck on anywhere. Let each person choose a verse he thinks he knows well and look for what remains “in the white space” around it. What have we read literally, when we should have searched further?

The Corridor and the Palace



PRESENTATION

A listener asks the Rav: how can the sanctification of the Divine name belong to the world to come, when Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Shabbat, our whole Jewish life takes place here below? The Rav answers that three notions must be distinguished.

THE QUESTION

What link is there between this world and the world to come — and can one gain the one by detaching oneself from the other?

THE ANSWER

“This world is like a vestibule before the world to come” (Pirkei Avot 4:16).

Olam hazeh, this world, is the corridor: one must pass through it to reach the palace. Olam haba is the world of truth, the one where we see the fruit of all we have done. And the Garden of Eden is yet another stage. To obtain the fruit, the bad branches, the bad leaves, all the deviations had to be weeded out here below.

We are taught that one short hour here below is better than the whole life of the world to come, and, conversely, that one hour of serenity in the hereafter is better than all the life of this world put together. There is an equation here: it is by investing ourselves in this world that we build our olam haba, and it cannot be acquired by detaching oneself from here below.

This is also the answer to the question about philosophy. The wisdom that relates only to this world is the one the nachash develops; true wisdom joins to it the vision of the transcendent. The Greek philosophers did the opposite and ignored this world. In both cases, the two spheres were not brought together.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

What we do here is the rough draft of a life.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The rough draft of a life: the image can worry or reassure. Let each person say what in his week looks like a botched draft, and what already looks like a fair copy. What would he need to “copy out neatly”?

Nothing Is Erased



PRESENTATION

We delete our cumbersome messages as soon as they overload our computers. The Rav refuses to imagine the Creator doing the same with His creatures: bringing them into the world, then deleting them like useless letters.

THE QUESTION

If everything we do leaves a trace, are we condemned by our sins?

THE ANSWER

“All your deeds are written in a book” (Pirkei Avot 2:1).

There is what is called a reshimu: a trace always remains. Everything you do is written in a register. The Creator does not bring creatures into the world in order to erase them, as one does with messages that have become an overload, uncontrollable and of little interest.

But of course, one can correct. It is a possibility offered: that is the work of tikkun. The trace is not there to condemn; it is there to be taken up again. Nothing is erased, and that is precisely why everything can still be repaired.

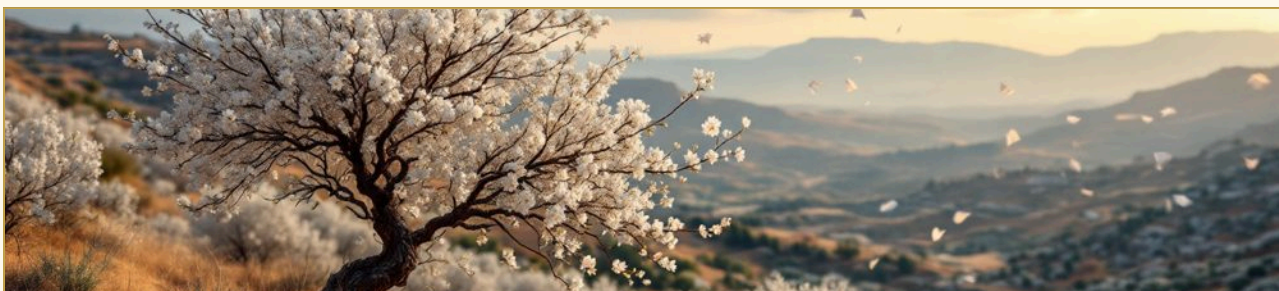
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

There is always a trace; a trace always remains.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Let each person think of a trace he has left and would rather erase: a word, a gesture, an absence. Rather than trying to erase it, how could he “take it up again” this week?

Her Soul Blossomed



PRESENTATION

Sarah dies when she is told that Avraham has taken her only son and already offered him as a burnt offering. Rashi uses a rare expression for this death, which everyday Hebrew and biblical Hebrew do not read the same way.

THE QUESTION

What does “her soul flew away” mean — and why was the news about her son enough to close her life?

THE ANSWER

Rashi on Bereshit 23:2: at the news of the binding, “her soul flew away” — parchah nishmatah.

In everyday Hebrew, parchah nishmatah means that her soul flew away. In biblical Hebrew, the verb parach means to blossom, to flourish: her soul blossomed. Sarah considered that the chapter of her life was closed.

Our Sages say that whoever teaches Torah to his friend's son, giving him the ability to flourish, is considered as if he had brought him into the world. For children are regarded not only as beings of flesh and blood, but as spiritual entities we have brought to realisation in our lives.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

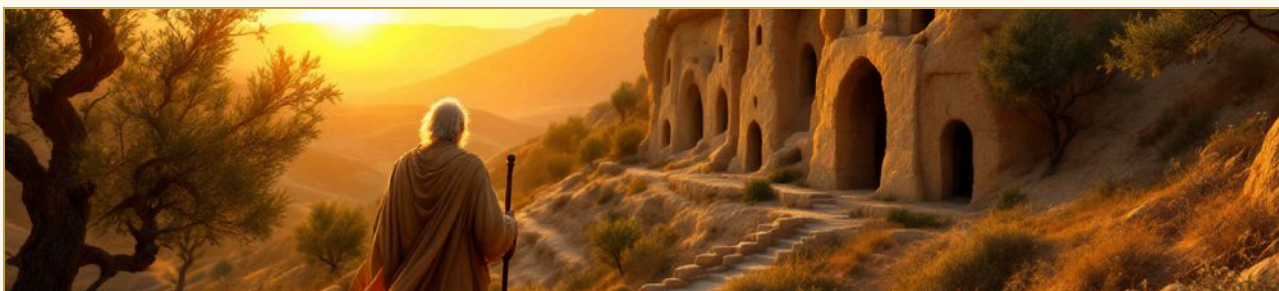
Children are spiritual entities we have brought to realisation in our lives, and they are our olam haba.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We often measure our children by their grades or their profession. Let each person say what he has seen blossom in someone else thanks to him. And whom, outside his family, could he “bring into the world” by teaching him something?

SUBJECT 11

One Does Not Die, One Withdraws



PRESENTATION

When someone passes away, accepted Hebrew speaks neither of decease nor of death. It uses a word employed today for someone who has resigned or left his post: niftar.

THE QUESTION

What does the word niftar say about death — and what is the best way to “withdraw”?

THE ANSWER

“I will lie down with my fathers” (Bereshit 47:30).

Niftar means that he has withdrawn. He is not dead; he has withdrawn into the dwelling of his world. That is his olam haba; that his soul should rest in the Garden of Eden is yet another stage.

And the best way to withdraw is not through some great exploit. There is a set expression: I will lie down beside my fathers. I am going to join them, I am going to complete the work they began and that I did with them.

As we advance in life, we draw closer to the deadline. But that does not mean we are drawing closer to the end: we are drawing closer to the world to come.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

He is not dead; he has withdrawn.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Let each person name a task begun by his parents or grandparents, which he did with them. Where does it stand today? And what task would he like to leave begun for those who will come after?

The City of the Four



PRESENTATION

Sarah dies in Kiryat Arba, the city of the four, that is, Hebron. The text could simply have said Hebron. It insists on both names, and the Rav sees in this a message addressed to all in whom the consciousness of death has been awakened.

THE QUESTION

Which four are meant — and why does this place bear a name that means “to unite”?

THE ANSWER

“Sarah died in Kiryat Arba, that is Hebron” (Bereshit 23:2).

Hebron, from chaver, to unite: it is the meeting place of the spiritual and the material, of heaven and earth. Four, because Adam, Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov are buried there, as are Chavah, Sarah, Rivkah and Leah. But also because this city previously belonged to other forces, those of death, and there are four modes of execution.

Stoning is the revolt of the forces of the earth against man. Fire answers those desires that have burned up the being, a negative energy. The sword is the death that wars hold in store for us, the violence of man and his ego. Strangulation is suffocating in a world to which one has not managed to adapt. That is death when it is imposed from outside, as a punishment.

When it comes from within, everything becomes a will to convert what makes up the universe: the inanimate, what grows, what lives and what speaks. The Me'arat HaMachpelah, the cave of doubling, releases this message: the stone laid on the grave is not a stone of abandonment; it is a stone for new building.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Life is worth only what one builds with a view to the world to come.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each of us knows, among these four deaths, the one that lies in wait for him: heaviness, burning desires, violence, suffocation. Let each person name his own, without comment. And the stone he, for his part, would like to lay in order to build.