

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

# LECH LECHA

*9 Questions for the Shabbat Table*

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Nine questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture "Lech Lecha: Avraham versus Pharaoh": a defeated Pharaoh who returns through his daughter, a maidservant who thinks herself mistress, a child judged "where he is", and the milah, which in Hebrew also means the word. Up to this answer of the Rav: a mitzvah is something one is always in the middle of doing.



*Rav Raphaël Benizri*

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*Themes for reflection and questions to share around the Lech Lecha table*

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## Defeated, and Yet Victorious



### PRESENTATION

Avram has just escaped the furnace and is beginning to spread faith in a Creator. Two forces oppose him: Lot, from inside his house, and Pharaoh, from outside. Pharaoh does not proceed like Nimrod, by fire; he goes after Sarai.

### THE QUESTION

*Pharaoh failed to take Sarai for himself; why, then, does the Rav say he succeeded?*

### THE ANSWER

***“Sarai, Avram's wife, had borne him no children; she had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar” (Bereshit 16:1).***

Pharaoh meant to pass Egyptian culture through Sarai: his descendants would be, from the standpoint of the law, Avram's children, but Egyptian in spirit and identity. Sarah firmly opposes it, a providence watches over Avram, and Pharaoh fails. Avram goes up from Egypt with a great treasure — but above all with Pharaoh's daughter, whose father judged it better for her to be a maidservant in this house than to grow up in his palace.

What Pharaoh could not achieve himself, he obtains through her. This daughter, regarded as a daughter of the house, never stops asserting her belonging to Egypt, to its culture and its instincts, even though she has adopted Avram's faith. Sarah was barren; Hagar becomes Avram's concubine, with Sarah's consent; and from this Yishmael is born, who carries on Pharaoh's design. All of Avram's work, says the Rav, was for a moment put in jeopardy by Hagar's presence.

### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*What Pharaoh could not achieve himself, he would like to do through his daughter. Paradoxically, he succeeds.*

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What we refused head-on sometimes comes back through a service door. What influence have we let into our home “as a maidservant”, without seeing that it was gradually taking the main place?

## The Maidservant and the Name



### PRESENTATION

Hagar, now pregnant, thinks herself the mistress of the house: she is carrying a child, while her mistress, despite all her prayers, has obtained nothing. Sarah sends her away; an angel meets her by a spring, in the desert.

### THE QUESTION

*What does the angel tell Hagar — and what does the name he gives the child mean?*

### THE ANSWER

**“Return to your mistress” (Bereshit 16:9); “you shall call him Yishmael, for the L-rd has heard your affliction” (Bereshit 16:11).**

The maidservant turned mother claims the main place in Avram's house. When Sarah sends her away, she becomes the object of a providential manifestation: an angel tells her to return to her mistress, to accept suffering there, and announces a son who will carry the name of G-d in his own name.

Two peoples thus carry the Divine name in their name: Israel and Yishmael. The only difference, says the Rav, is that in Yishmael this name is silent, while in Israel it resounds. Yishmael associated the name of G-d with his destiny, just as Israel did; but a name one carries is not enough, it must also make itself heard.

### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*The Divine name in Yishmael is silent. In Israel, it resounds.*

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Carrying the name of G-d is not enough; it must also resound. How, in our home, does the name of G-d “resound” — in what words, what gestures, what moments?

## The People of the Word

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### PRESENTATION

Esav, Yishmael: two sons standing at the threshold of Avraham's house. The Rav distinguishes them by their domain: one succeeds in making things, the other in speech.

### THE QUESTION

*What is Yishmael's particular danger — and what is the connection between circumcision and the word?*

### THE ANSWER

***Milah: in Hebrew, both circumcision and the word.***

Esav fulfils himself in the world of making, of technology. Yishmael, whose name speaks of listening — G-d hears — is the people of speech. Yet it is Israel that is the bearer of the word, its spokesman: Yishmael's danger is therefore the danger of speech.

By what is Israel distinguished? By the milah. In Hebrew, the same word means circumcision and the spoken word. Once you have cut the air of your mouth by forming a word or a sentence, it is over: you can no longer take it back or manipulate it. It is like a cut flower: just try gluing it back onto its branch.

### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*Once you have cut the air of your mouth by forming the word or the sentence, it is over; you can no longer take it back.*

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

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A word once spoken cannot be glued back. What word do we regret having said — or not having said? And how can we make sure this week that our words are “circumcised”, weighed before being cut?

## Judged Where He Is



### PRESENTATION

Driven out, Hagar wanders in the desert; the water in the skin is used up. She leaves the child under a bush and moves away so as not to watch him die. The text says that G-d heard the voice of the child “where he is”.

### THE QUESTION

*Why does heaven answer Yishmael — and what does it mean to judge someone “where he is”?*

### THE ANSWER

**“G-d has heard the voice of the boy where he is” (Bereshit 21:17).**

Hagar remains the Egyptian, and the text recalls it every time: she has not renounced her origins. When the child is thirsty, she does not want to witness his death and leaves him, as if to say: take him back. It is heaven that hears the child's voice and takes pity on him.

The text takes care to specify that he is judged where he is, here and now. Is he to be condemned, or does he have merits? I judge him in the present, as he is: he is a boy, he has done nothing wrong, so I must answer his cries. Yishmael deserved it. And the Rav points out a symmetry: the mother calls the place “the Living One who sees me”, as Avraham, on the mountain where he carries his son, will say that there the L-rd is seen. Both are touched by a vision through their child.

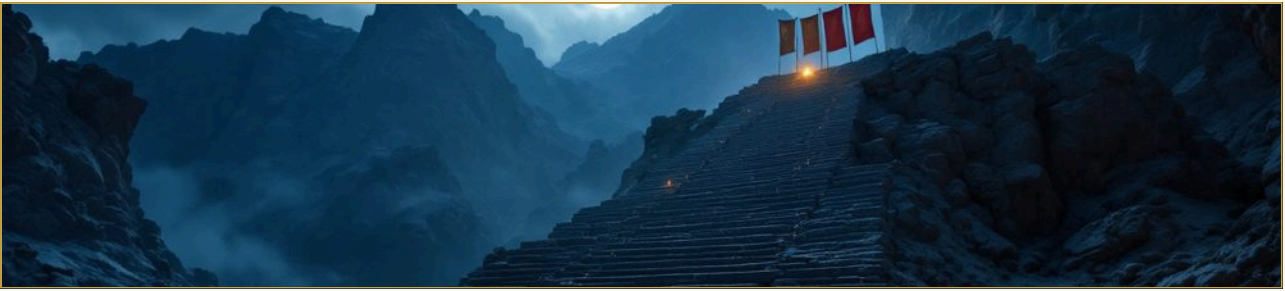
### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*I judge him in the present, as he is, here and now.*

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We often judge others by what they will become, or by what their parents did. Who around us deserves to be seen “where he is”, today? Let each person do this for someone.

## Neither Babel nor Rome



### PRESENTATION

Four exiles correspond to four stages in the growth of the Jewish people: Babel, Persia, Greece, Rome. In Yaakov's dream, these powers are seen going up and then coming down. But where is Yishmael?

### THE QUESTION

*Why is Yishmael not among the four kingdoms — and what is the particular nature of his claim?*

### THE ANSWER

***“And behold, a ladder was set up on the earth” (Bereshit 28:12): the powers that go up and come down.***

The four powers sought to take Israel's place, to say “I am Israel” and to seize its kingship; they will succeed, but for a limited time. Yishmael is not a power like the others: he is an entity created independently of them, who grew up in Avraham's house and claims his share there.

He lays claim to the birthright, and so to a double portion, and above all to a continuity of faith: he is a man of faith and prayer. The Rav describes this figure as that of someone who can believe, practise his faith to the very end and do everything in the name of G-d, without this being tied to a morality or subject to a structure: faith is one thing, and the world here below the object of every pleasure. Faith, then, obliges nothing.

### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*Yishmael is not a power like the others.*

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Is a faith that obliges nothing still a faith? Let each person name a place where his faith concretely obliges him — in his speech, his money, his time.

## What Was Yishmael Laughing At?



### PRESENTATION

Sarah demands that Yishmael be sent away because she saw him *metzachek*, “laughing”. The word is in the present tense. The commentators have proposed very grave readings; one master proposes another.

### THE QUESTION

*What was Yishmael laughing at — and what was really on his mind?*

### THE ANSWER

**“Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian [...] *metzachek*” (Bereshit 21:9).**

The commentators read into it idolatry, debauchery or bloodshed: three ways of despising the image of G-d in man or of using the other as an object. But Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai disputes these readings: he was laughing, he says, at seeing the children of Israel, through Yitzchak, cling to a land.

For Yishmael, it is not territory that matters: what occupies him is knowing where Avraham's faith really lies — with him or with Yitzchak. And it is solely for this reason that he would not want to let Yitzchak put down roots anywhere: he must always remain subject to his way of seeing things.

### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*For him, what matters is where Avraham's faith really lies: is it his, or Yitzchak's?*

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Behind some territorial conflicts lies a question of inheritance: who is the true son? In our family, are there rivalries of this kind? How can we reassure each person without giving up the truth?

## SUBJECT 07

### “A Wild Ass of a Man”



#### PRESENTATION

The angel announces to Hagar that her son will be pere adam, a wild ass of a man, a wild man. For the Rav, it is not the word “wild” that is formidable, but the word “man”.

#### THE QUESTION

*Why is man harder to master than a beast — and what does this say about Yishmael's double identity?*

#### THE ANSWER

**“He will be a wild ass of a man [pere adam]” (Bereshit 16:12).**

A beast is limited by its make-up, by the tendencies it expresses, by the image it reflects; as soon as one grasps its weaknesses even a little, one can master it. An ox one day old is already called an ox: it will not evolve, it will not develop another nature. Man, however, is taken from the earth, adamah, but he can claim to bear the image from above: he follows a development, he is its subject, and he can be neither grasped, nor mastered, nor conditioned.

This, says the Rav, is Yishmael's danger: from his mother he keeps the wild identity, and from his father the identity of man. How can this double identity be overcome? The Rav answers by returning to the milah.

#### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*An ox, even one day old, is called an ox; whereas man you cannot grasp, master or condition.*

#### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What makes man great — the ability to change — also makes him dangerous. What force in our home needs to be directed rather than reined in? How should we deal with a child who “can't sit still”?

## A Milah Without Words



### PRESENTATION

How can Yishmael's double identity be answered? The Rav returns to circumcision, and distinguishes two ways of having descendants.

### THE QUESTION

*Why must circumcision take place both in the flesh and in language — and what becomes of it when it is no more than a sign of identity?*

### THE ANSWER

***Milah: the cutting of the flesh, and the spoken word.***

Through the organ of the milah we reproduce: it determines our offspring. But there is another way of having descendants: education, which passes through speech. At the same time as the cut is made in the flesh, it should be made at the level of language, without remaining at a stammer. Doing both at once gives the act its full dimension, and makes it possible to bring others in, as it is said of Avraham and Sarah that they “made souls”.

But if Israel seeks its identity only in a practice of convenience — we'll have a surgeon do the milah, why a mohel? — then the identity it puts forward is of the same nature as Yishmael's, and he can say that he is an heir with the same title. Yet the inheritance, the morashah, has two titles: the land and the Torah. That is why the struggle takes on the look of a religious war rather than a national one.

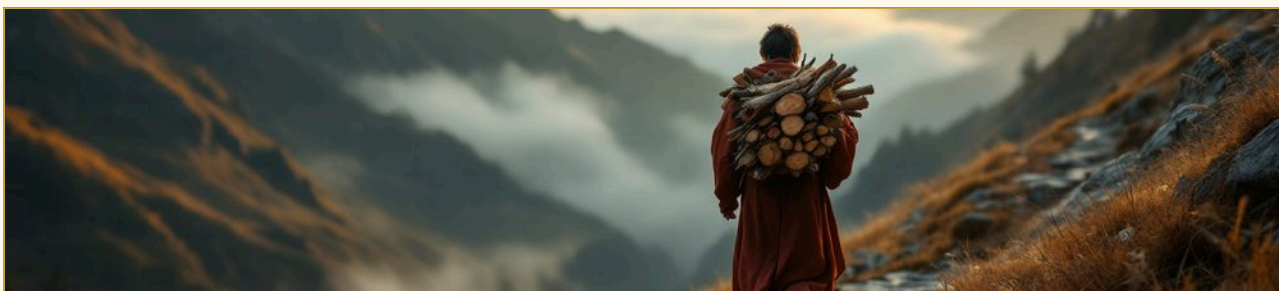
### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*At the same time as the cut is made in the flesh, it should be made at the level of language.*

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Are our rites signs of identity for us, or words that transmit? Let each person choose a mitzvah we do at home and say what it teaches — in words — to those who see it.

## Having Done, or Being in the Middle of Doing



### PRESENTATION

Yishmael boasts of having been circumcised at thirteen, old enough to refuse, while Yitzchak was circumcised at eight days. At the end of the lecture, a listener asks: many Jews do the milah mechanically, without grasping its meaning — how do they differ from Yishmael?

### THE QUESTION

*What distinguishes a mitzvah that is “done” from a mitzvah that is “being done”?*

### THE ANSWER

**“After these things, G-d tested Abraham” (Bereshit 22:1); “then our mouth will be filled with laughter” (Tehillim 126:2).**

Yitzchak answers Yishmael: if G-d asked me to sacrifice my life for Him, I would do it. And it is then, says the Rav, that he is taken at his word: G-d tests Abraham, and Yitzchak lets himself be carried onto the altar. Both sons almost offered their lives; but one prides himself on an accomplished act, the other declares himself ready.

When Yishmael does the milah, the Rav answers the listener, he exhausts its whole meaning in it: it is over. The Jew, however, is always in the middle of doing it. Whoever says “I have studied, I have given tzedakah, I have done...” is mistaken: when we study Torah, when we keep Shabbat, we are in progress; we have never done it completely. That is why Yitzchak does not laugh in the present: his name says that he will laugh, in the future — when the L-rd brings back the exiles of Zion, our mouth will be filled with laughter.

### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*When we study Torah, it does not mean we have already done it completely: we are in progress.*

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

“I have already done it” or “I am in the middle of doing it”? Let each person choose a mitzvah he thinks he has “settled”, and say what he could still discover in it.