

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

LECH LECHA

10 Questions for the Shabbat Table

Ten questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture "Lech Lecha: Faith in Motion": a faith that does not freeze, a calendar that never quite repeats itself, a famine that sets history moving again, and an Egypt that would like to pass Avraham through its own womb. Up to these words: say that you are my sister.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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

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Leaving Without Going to Look First



PRESENTATION

When we move house, we first go and look: we weigh up what the place has to offer, then we make our plans. Avram sets out without asking a single question, toward a land the text does not even name.

THE QUESTION

Where is the faith in this departure — and why must not everything be obvious for there to be faith?

THE ANSWER

“Lech lecha”: *go for yourself (Bereshit 12:1).*

When everything is obvious, when everything is within reach, there is no problem of faith. But where there is no problem of faith, there is a great danger: that of clinging at all costs to acquired ideas, to our patterns, to our prejudices, to the givens we have built around us because they guarantee our intellectual and spiritual comfort. That is where the danger of idolatry lies: in fixed principles from which we no longer want to budge. Then there is no longer any possibility of openness, of correction, of teshuvah — and therefore no longer any possibility of revelation.

“Go to the land that I will show you” means: where I will reveal to you things you do not suspect today, and which may call your received ideas into question. This presupposes an uninterrupted march.

The Rav also notes the order of things: the land came before the revelation at Sinai. A land was first destined for Avraham, and to this land he had to go with the utmost faith.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

When everything is obvious, when everything is within reach, then there is no problem of faith.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Our most comfortable certainties are often the oldest. Let each person name a conviction he has not re-examined for a long time. And which house would we need to leave this year in order to see something else?

The Academies of Shem and Ever



PRESENTATION

Avraham is readily presented as a child prodigy who, at the age of three, discovers the Master of the world on his own. The Rav qualifies this: others had searched before him, and schools had already prepared the ground.

THE QUESTION

Did Avraham discover everything by himself — and what did he receive from those who came before him?

THE ANSWER

“Chanoch walked with G-d” (Bereshit 5:24); “Noach walked with G-d” (Bereshit 6:9).

If we hold on to an Avraham asking questions from the age of three, we have before us a gifted child of phenomenal intelligence, able on his own to grasp a Master of the universe. But before him there were men like Chanoch and Noach, who walked with G-d. Avraham, at this stage, has not yet spoken with G-d: it is G-d who reveals Himself to him.

So there was already a body of research, and even two academies training disciples: that of Shem, which sought the name of G-d through His attributes, and that of Ever, which founded its teaching on discovering G-d through one's fellow man. Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov were all disciples of these schools, which had very precise aims. And the first element of their research, say our Sages, was paradoxically *ibbur*, conception.

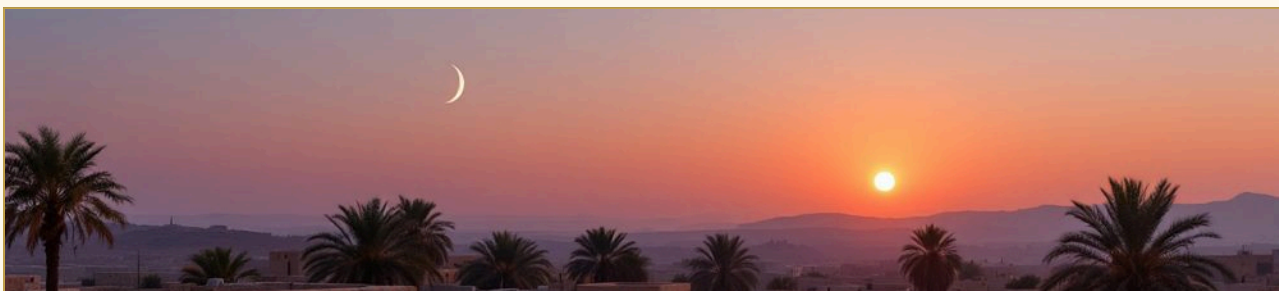
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

There was already a body of research carried out by men.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

No one starts from zero. Of which “academy” — parents, teachers, books — has each of us been a disciple without knowing it? And to which fellow man do we owe part of what we know of G-d?

The Secret of Conception



PRESENTATION

Of a pregnant woman, Hebrew says that she is *me'uberet*: she carries within her a life different from her own. The same word designates the leap year, the one that carries a thirteenth month. The Rav sees in it the first secret Avraham studied.

THE QUESTION

What does the thirteenth month of the Hebrew calendar teach — and what does it have to do with study and with the land?

THE ANSWER

Ibbur hashanah: the year “pregnant” with a thirteenth month.

Calculating the leap year means making up the gap that the moon falls behind the sun in a year: the two courses must be brought back into line. The solar year is a cycle identical to itself, where the seasons repeat without change. The lunar year is made of months, and the month, *chodesh*, carries renewal: things do not repeat automatically; an effort of adjustment is needed each time. That is the secret of conception.

This secret in time is the same as in study: it is not a matter of reciting by rote, nor of taking the text as it stands, but of searching for what it carries within. And so it is with the land: in walking its length and breadth, Avraham already knew what the *toldot* would be, the stages of history the Jewish people would pass through. Walking, studying and conceiving are one and the same act.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Things do not repeat automatically; an effort of adjustment must be made as one goes along.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In a family, many things repeat like the seasons. What, this year, would deserve a “thirteenth month” — an adjustment so that our home stays in step with what we have become?

A Deity for One's Own Use



PRESENTATION

With Avraham, says the Rav, a new era of history begins. The two thousand years before were those of chaos, when each person clung to the forces around him until he worshipped them. He gives an image of it: Pharaoh and his river.

THE QUESTION

What distinguishes the worship of idolaters from the relationship of the righteous with G-d?

THE ANSWER

“And behold, the L-rd stood above him” (Bereshit 28:13).

History begins with Avraham. The sum of six thousand years divides into periods of two thousand, and the first are those of chaos, of emptiness: each person clings to the forces around him, and because they are beyond him, he ends up worshipping them.

But this worship makes the deity one serves a deity to suit oneself, for one's own use. Pharaoh is the image of it: the river that feeds all Egypt is his god, but he is the one who manages it. With the righteous, the formula is reversed: G-d stands above them, as He stands above Yaakov in his dream.

That is why Avraham is the one who dared to destroy all fixed and preconceived ideas, all ideologies, and who anchored the innovation of his time in attachment to the land and to the values of the Torah.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

History begins with Avraham.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We sometimes “manage” G-d as Pharaoh managed his river: praying when it suits us, keeping what is convenient. In what area of our life is G-d above us — and in which is He at our service?

A Land That Drinks the Water of Heaven



PRESENTATION

Egypt lives from its river, which irrigates its fields without anyone having to raise their eyes. The promised land has no great river running through it. The Rav sees in this the very character of this land.

THE QUESTION

Why does the promised land depend on rain — and what is the connection between bread and the word of G-d?

THE ANSWER

“It drinks water from the rain of heaven” (Devarim 11:11); “man does not live by bread alone” (Devarim 8:3).

The promised land is a land where heaven and earth coordinate their energies. It has no river that, as in Egypt, ensures the irrigation of the fields; one must therefore raise one's eyes to heaven and pray that heaven join its energy to that of the earth. Here Avraham accepts another mode of knowledge.

On this land, the need for bread, man's basic food, has as its equivalent the need for the word of G-d. Man does not live by bread alone; but this bread is itself the channel of another food, the spiritual nourishment of the being. The hunger of the body and the expectation of revelation answer each other there.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

This bread is itself the channel of another food, the spiritual nourishment of the being.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The bread on our table seems to us to go without saying, like the Nile for Egypt. What would change if we received it like rain, raising our eyes? Let each person name one thing he would like, this week, to receive rather than take.

A Promised Land That Starves at Once



PRESENTATION

Avram has barely settled in the land of Canaan, after so many promises, when a famine strikes the country — and it strikes that very country. He goes down to Egypt on his own initiative.

THE QUESTION

How can the promised land begin with hunger — and why does the one who could bear the trial go down nonetheless?

THE ANSWER

“There was a famine in the land, and Avram went down to Egypt” (Bereshit 12:10); “He makes peace in your borders; He satisfies you with the finest of wheat” (Tehillim 147:14).

This could well shake Avram’s faith. He himself could have endured this trial, but he did not want to impose it on his companion: some convictions that seem easy and obvious to us must never be imposed on others. He relies on this principle: whoever wants to ensure peace in his immediate surroundings must first ensure bread. Another commentary adds that Avram does not want to present a Judaism of poverty: he has won souls, Sarah too among the women, and their needs must be met.

This famine, which will return with Yitzchak and then with Yaakov, is no accident. There is a will here to move history forward. When people settle into the daily routine and forget themselves, a multitude of idols, ideologies and beliefs destroy society from within. The crisis aims at renewal, a new thrust — and here, at sharing Avraham’s faith with other civilisations.

THE RAV’S CONCLUSION

History cannot move forward without crisis.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We judge a path by the comfort it provides, and we doubt as soon as it leaves us hungry. What trial this year was a sign not that we had gone wrong, but that we had to move forward? And what have we imposed on someone close in the name of a conviction that was ours alone?

A French Jew or a Frenchman of Jewish Faith?



PRESENTATION

Egypt is at that time at the forefront of civilisation. It sees itself as the great empire, called to melt every other current into itself — including the one carried by Avraham and Sarah, for whom Pharaoh has great regard.

THE QUESTION

What does Pharaoh really want in taking Sarai — and what should a Jew do with the values of the civilisations that host him?

THE ANSWER

“The woman was taken into Pharaoh's house” (Bereshit 12:15).

Pharaoh would like the womb of Egypt to be the one represented by Avraham's wife: his subjects would then be Jews by the book, since everything follows the mother, but each one's identity would remain Egyptian. That, says the Rav, is the whole dialectic between a French Jew and a Frenchman of the Jewish faith: are we bearers of a civilisation's values, tinged with our Jewish values, or do we claim our Jewish values first, having adopted this civilisation “as a sister”?

This does not mean that everything must be rejected. The nations — Egyptian, Greco-Roman, European, African, it makes no difference — develop a culture, and there is reason to integrate some of its values, which will find their place in the puzzle of Jewish thought. The whole question is which one carries the other. That is what dialogue is.

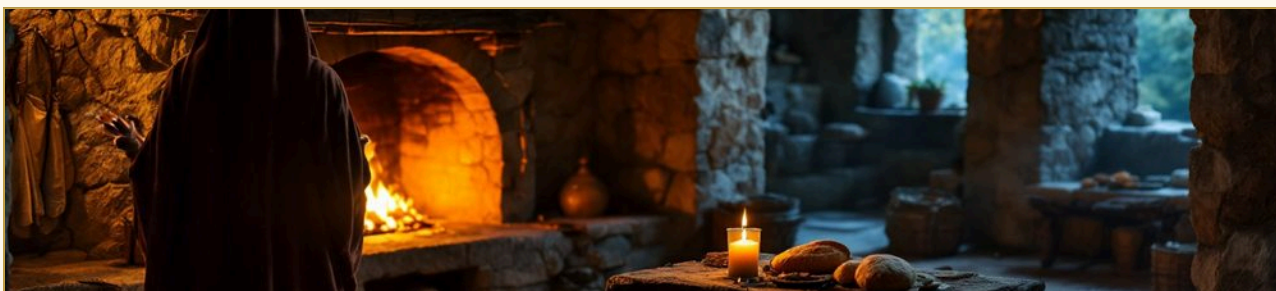
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Not everything is to be rejected. There is reason to integrate certain values that will find their place in the puzzle of Jewish thought.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Let each person name a value received from the society we live in that he is glad to have integrated. And another which, little by little, has moved ahead of our Jewish values without our having decided it.

The Home Is the Wife



PRESENTATION

Pharaoh fails to take Sarai for himself; later he will try to enter Abraham's house another way. Between these episodes, the Rav brings to light what truly founds this house, and why it is the one being targeted.

THE QUESTION

Why is Pharaoh's attack aimed at Abraham's wife — and why would a Torah without a home remain theoretical?

THE ANSWER

Our Sages: “his house — that is his wife”.

The wife is considered the bayit, the house itself: she is the dwelling place, the one who puts all of Abraham's Torah into practice. If this teaching has no laboratory where it is applied, it will remain entirely theoretical. It is the wife's distinctive role to give reality to her husband and to what he represents. There is therefore a direct link between the promise of the land and safeguarding Abraham's house against any takeover.

This danger of a takeover of the feminine, says the Rav, threatens to wreck the whole journey, and it will recur in history: at the very birth of the Jewish people, Pharaoh will order the boys to be killed and the girls to be let live, in order to pass Egyptian civilisation through the Jewish womb.

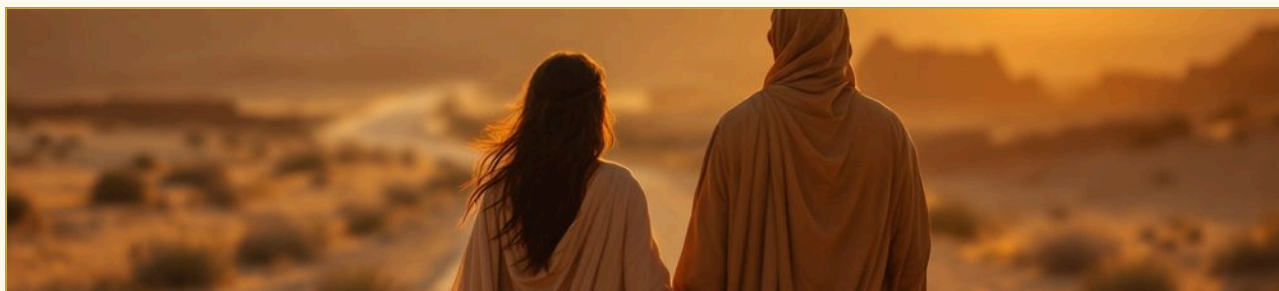
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

If this Torah has no laboratory where it is put into practice, it will remain entirely theoretical.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Where does our Torah become real — at what moment of the day, in what gesture of the home? Let each person name one thing he saw practised at home before he ever learned it.

“Say That You Are My Sister”



PRESENTATION

At the gates of Egypt, Avram says to Sarai: I know that you are a beautiful woman. He says it in the past tense — he has not just noticed it. Then he asks her to present herself as his sister.

THE QUESTION

Why call a wife a sister — and what beauty, exactly, are we talking about here?

THE ANSWER

“Behold, I know that you are a woman beautiful to look upon” (Bereshit 12:11); “Grace is deceptive and beauty is vain” (Mishlei 31:30); “If only you were to me like a brother” (Shir Hashirim 8:1).

They are arriving in a country where beauty is not inward but outward, the kind that dulls, wrinkles and fades. Inner beauty, on the contrary, only takes up more and more room. That is the beauty in question, the one that characterises four women of biblical history: Sarah, Rachav, Avigayil and Esther — of whom it is said that her complexion was greenish and that all her charm lay within.

And “sister” opens a new dimension in the relationship between man and woman. It had begun with “male and female He created them”, as with the animals; then Adam recognised the woman by his own attribute, *ishah* drawn from *ish*; then he called her Chavah, mother of all living. Here, the relationship is that of brother and sister: a forbidden relationship, and therefore a pure love, not conditioned by physical attraction. What then governs intimate life is a spiritual family one wants to bring to completion.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Here, on the contrary, the relationship is forbidden. The love is pure.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We know how to say that those close to us are beautiful, useful, faithful. Do we still know how to say what is inward in them and has no witness? Let each person do so for the one sitting next to him.

SUBJECT 10

Taking from Egypt What Should Be Taken



PRESENTATION

Avram gives a reason for his request: “so that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may live on account of you”. Literally, it is the fear of being killed. The Rav looks for the hidden meaning of the sentence.

THE QUESTION

What does Avram mean by “that it may go well with me because of you” — and what can one take from a culture without belonging to it?

THE ANSWER

“So that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may live on account of you” (Bereshit 12:13).

Literally, Avram says: let them treat me well because of you, and let me stay alive, for they may do away with me to take you. But in the search for the hidden meaning, the sentence says something else: so that I may take from this Egyptian civilisation what there is reason to take, and give life to everything you represent for me.

We will find this again at the Exodus, when every woman asks her neighbour for silver and gold vessels. Was this gold and silver needed? They have, says the Rav, another resonance.

Pharaoh, having failed, will attempt the reverse movement: passing Avraham's spiritual values through an Egyptian womb, by bringing his own daughter into Avraham's house.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

That I may take what there is reason to take from Egyptian civilisation, and give life to everything you represent for me.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We all carry something away from the places where we have lived, studied, worked. What did we take “from Egypt” that serves our Jewish home today? And what did we take that would have been better left there?