

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

LECH LECHA

10 Questions for the Shabbat Table

Ten questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture "Lech Lecha: The War Against the Four Kings (Part One)": a war Avram did not seek, four kingdoms already present in the second verse of the Torah, a nephew taken hostage to reach his uncle. Up to the only spoils Avram brings back: a thread and a shoelace.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

Table of Topics

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

01 **Must One Pass Through War to Reach Peace?**

02 **Amraphel Is Nimrod**

03 **Four Kingdoms from the Second Verse**

04 **Why Four?**

05 **Those Who Had Grown Up**

06 **Taking Lot to Reach Avram**

07 **Is Your Blood Redder?**

08 **Since When Is Lot His Brother?**

09 **Malki-Tzedek Steps Out of the Shadows**

10 **Not a Thread, Not a Shoelace**

Must One Pass Through War to Reach Peace?



PRESENTATION

Chapter 14 tells of what the Rav calls the first world war of the Torah: four kings against five, two thousand years after creation. Before entering the text, he raises the question of war itself.

THE QUESTION

Must one pass through war to reach peace — and when does a war become legitimate?

THE ANSWER

In the morning prayer: G-d is “Master of wars, sowing righteousness, causing salvation to sprout”.

To aspire to peace is to recognise that there is a tension, a war beforehand. Why do animals not devour members of their own species, while men do? Because in man an instinct of domination comes into play: to reduce the other to one's service, to profit from his goods. Hence the idea of mutual dependence: war is avoided not in order to live in peace, but because one weighs one's losses against the economic advantages of not going to war.

Every morning we say of G-d that He is Master of wars — and immediately afterwards, that He sows righteousness and causes salvation to sprout. War is therefore not indispensable; but when deep convictions touching the foundation of justice and the moral order are at stake, there is reason to wage it. For there will always be factions and extremists who want to sow terror and seize power by force.

There is, moreover, a “book of the wars of the L-rd”: in it G-d answers the nations who claimed to have done everything for Israel that they sought only their own interest.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

War is not indispensable, but when deep convictions touching the foundation of justice and the sanctification of the moral order are at stake, there is reason to wage it.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In our home too there are quarrels of domination and quarrels of principle. Which recent quarrel was only a matter of territory? And which value would truly deserve a fight?

Amraphel Is Nimrod



PRESENTATION

The first king named is Amraphel, king of Shinar. Our Sages identify him with Nimrod — the very one who had Avram thrown into the furnace to silence his campaign in the name of One G-d.

THE QUESTION

What does the identity of the first of the four kings teach us, from the very first word of the account?

THE ANSWER

“It was in the days of Amraphel, king of Shinar” (Bereshit 14:1); our Sages: Amraphel is Nimrod.

The Rav rereads the name Amraphel as “the one who said: throw yourself in” — the order given to Avram to enter the blazing furnace. From the outset, then, the text places us in an ideological context, a context of faith: a rejection of G-d's hold over His creation, a rejection of faith in Divine providence. And this rejection, adds the Rav, has a following.

It is not Avram who leads this fight: it is kings contending for the universe. But all wars are flawed in that they fail to take into account that there is a Creator of the universe, who cares about this extraordinary work He has made and wants to bring it safely to port — through a tiny people, insignificant in appearance, but with all the energy and all the potential to carry this Divine project.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

All wars are flawed in that they fail to take into account that there is a Creator of the universe.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Do the conflicts around us, deep down, have something to do with what we believe? Let each person give an example where a seemingly material quarrel concealed a question of values.

SUBJECT 03

Four Kingdoms from the Second Verse



PRESENTATION

Our Sages read in the second verse of the Torah — *tohu, bohu, darkness, the deep* — the seeds of four kingdoms that would mark Israel's exile. The Rav finds them again in the four kings of this chapter.

THE QUESTION

What do these four kingdoms represent — and at what levels of our being did they strike?

THE ANSWER

“The earth was *tohu* and *bohu*, and darkness was on the face of the deep” (Bereshit 1:2).

Babel, which drove the Jewish people from its land and took power in its place; Madai, which sought to wipe it out in the time of Haman; Yavan, Greece, which sought to replace its genius; and finally Rome, the kingdom of all peoples, heir to the other three, in which all the ferments of the rejection of Avraham's world come together. For this voice disturbs, precisely because it consents neither to concessions nor to reforms.

Just as man has a living soul, a spirit and a higher soul — *nefesh, ruach, neshamah* — these powers attacked on three levels. They sought to suppress our ability to live and to unfold; they sought to silence our spirit; and they assailed our soul, appropriating it and claiming that they were Israel.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

This voice of Avraham disturbs.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Suppressing, silencing, replacing: which of these three dangers seems most current to us today? And what does our family do to keep its own voice alive?

Why Four?



PRESENTATION

Four kings against five. The Rav pauses over the number itself, and relates it to the fourth day of creation, then to the four heads of the river that flows out of the Garden of Eden.

THE QUESTION

What does the number four say about these kingdoms that seized Israel's original kingship?

THE ANSWER

“G-d made the two great luminaries” (Bereshit 1:16); “a river went out of Eden [...] and divided into four heads” (Bereshit 2:10).

The fourth day is that of the two great luminaries, which, according to our Sages, could not bear to reign together: there cannot be one crown for two kings. Tradition also says of this day that it is considered unfavourable for young children; the Rav draws a lesson from this: it is often children who bear the consequences of their parents' actions, and we are not always attentive to what our commitments and our deeds bring about.

And when the garden was lost, the separation took place in four streams, to the four corners of the earth. This is a way of saying that the scattering began through the fault of man, who sinned out of pride in wanting to be like G-d. The four kingdoms that robbed us of this original kingship and condemned us to exile follow in this line.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We are not always attentive to all the consequences of our commitments, our gestures, our deeds.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Our children sometimes carry the weight of our choices. What adult commitment in our family weighs on the youngest without their having been asked? How can we lighten it?

Those Who Had Grown Up



PRESENTATION

The five kings, tribal chiefs around the Dead Sea, served Kedorlaomer for twelve years; in the thirteenth year they rebelled; in the fourteenth, he comes back to crush them. On the way, he strikes other peoples whom the text takes care to name.

THE QUESTION

Why do the five kings rebel — and who are these peoples struck between the two blocs?

THE ANSWER

“Twelve years they served Kedorlaomer, and in the thirteenth year they rebelled” (Bereshit 14:4).

The text does not say who started it. The Midrash suggests an explanation: these tribes had agreed, up to a certain limit, to be the subjects of the four powers contending for the universe; then they no longer wanted it. They had grown up.

Between the two blocs there are also irreducible peoples. They want no order, submit to nothing — and for that very reason they are capable of any act, however brutal, to impress and to frighten. It is they who take centre stage when the kings have withdrawn and peace is thought to have returned. The place they come back to, moreover, bears the name of a court, Ein Mishpat: a policy, a path that has been established and that one would like to sanctify.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

They are extremists; they want no order, they want to submit to nothing.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There comes a moment when we stop accepting what we used to accept. What “thirteenth year” have we lived through — a dependence we freed ourselves from as we grew up? How did we do it?

Taking Lot to Reach Avram



PRESENTATION

The four kings gain the upper hand; the king of Sodom flees, the fugitives fall into the bitumen pits. Then Lot, who lived in Sodom, is carried off with his possessions. The Rav refuses to see this as a mere war of conquest.

THE QUESTION

Why do these kings seize Lot — and what kind of war is this, then?

THE ANSWER

“They took Lot, Avram's nephew, and his possessions, and departed; for he lived in Sodom” (Bereshit 14:12).

An army coming from the north to conquer the south would have seen its provisions rot along the way: that is not it. Other peoples joined in, interested only in plunder, without any real objective in this war. They are not trying to occupy a country: they are trying to take hostages, to exchange them for ransom.

The real target is Avram: the aim is to reach him and strip him of the crown he claims. Yet he cannot be attacked head-on. So they attack those who no longer recognise themselves in him, and use them to work their way back up to him. This is neither an economic war nor a war of conquest: it is a war of values, an ideological war.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Avraham cannot be attacked head-on; they will attack those who no longer recognise themselves in Avraham.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Those who want to reach a family often go through its most distant member. Who in our family is most exposed because he no longer really recognises himself in us? What can we do for him?

Is Your Blood Redder?



PRESENTATION

Avram learns that Lot is a captive. He arms his men, three hundred and eighteen, divides them into two groups during the night, and pursues the four kings as far as Dan. Our Sages question this choice.

THE QUESTION

Did Avram have the right to risk his life for Lot — and how does one man prevail against four kings?

THE ANSWER

“He armed his trained men, born in his house, three hundred and eighteen” (Bereshit 14:14); our Sages: the numerical value of Eliezer.

Our Sages frame the question in terms of the principle forbidding the sacrifice of one life for another: who says your blood is redder than his? The Rav answers through the nature of the conflict. Avram is being challenged in what he is; heaven does not intervene to save Lot; and since this is an ideological war, a war of religion, he must for that very reason mobilise his disciples.

They number three hundred and eighteen, the numerical value of the name Eliezer: they are his disciples, say some; he took only Eliezer, say others. They divide into two camps during the night: it is a ruse rather than a show of force, the use of superior intelligence. How did one triumph against four? We are the answer, says the Rav: the people that survived all the schemes of the four empires that sought to wipe it out.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We are here today; we are the people that survived all the schemes of these four empires.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Our strength has never been numbers. In what recent situation did we succeed not by force, but by intelligence, patience or unity? Let each person tell his own.

Since When Is Lot His Brother?



PRESENTATION

The text says: “Avram heard that his brother had been taken captive”. Yet Lot parted from him; he chose another pole, and said in substance that he wanted neither Avram nor his G-d.

THE QUESTION

Why risk your life for a man who parted from you — and since when has Lot become his brother again?

THE ANSWER

“Avram heard that his brother had been taken captive” (Bereshit 14:14).

He remains so, answers the Rav, because he went a good part of the way with him, because he did not denounce him, because he remained upright with him, because he did not side with his enemies and did not sell him out. That is enough to consider him his brother. And even those who may have renounced the path of Israel, once they fight for the whole community, reach a level of holiness that many would envy.

One cannot cut an impulse short and deny it at its root. In those who once adhered to these values, even if they rejected them, the root will one day sprout again, through their children and grandchildren, what they once defended.

The question remains: was it right to close the house of study to go and fight? A Midrash reproaches Avram for it. The Rav takes from it that only moral men were enlisted, men of conviction, not gnawed by remorse for sin.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We must in no case reject, exclude, separate. And we cannot judge.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In every family there is someone who left and whom we stopped calling brother. Did he do anything other than follow another path? If he were in danger tomorrow, who here would go and fetch him?

Malki-Tzedek Steps Out of the Shadows



PRESENTATION

On the return from victory, Malki-Tzedek, king of Shalem, comes out to meet Avram with bread and wine, and blesses him. Our Sages identify him with Shem, son of Noach.

THE QUESTION

Why does Malki-Tzedek appear only now — and which of the two blesses the other?

THE ANSWER

“Malki-Tzedek, king of Shalem, brought out bread and wine; he was a priest of G-d Most High” (Bereshit 14:18).

The king of righteousness, king of Shalem, is Shem: the one who claims the ethics of his father Noach. He remained faithful, but he lived only for himself, striving for uprightness in the most complete discretion, because he felt unable to face a crowd. When he sees Avram triumph, he can at last come out of his reserve.

The commentators debate which one was the priest and which blessed the other. The Rav answers that, having reached this level, neither claims what the other grants him: they recognise each other. Israel is a kingdom of priests; and if the kohanim have recognised privileges, it is in order to bless the people with love. Before blessing, they turn to face it: even in the blessing there is no condescension.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Even in the blessing there is no condescension; there is only this love.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Around us there are “Malki-Tzedeks”: upright people who live their faith in silence, for lack of daring. Whom do we know like that? What could we do so that they too can come out to meet others?

SUBJECT 10

Not a Thread, Not a Shoelace



PRESENTATION

After the victory, the king of Sodom comes empty-handed and proposes: give me the people, keep the goods. Avram raises his hand and swears that he will take nothing — not a thread, not a shoelace.

THE QUESTION

Why refuse spoils that everyone grants him — and what did he finally bring back from this war?

THE ANSWER

“Not a thread nor a sandal strap [...], lest you say: I made Avram rich” (Bereshit 14:23); our Sages: as a reward, tzitzit and tefillin.

Avram did not wage this war to profit from other people's goods. He invokes G-d Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth — who fused the material into the spiritual and the spiritual into the material — and he refuses even the cord and the lace, so that no one will say he built his wealth on another's compensation.

Our Sages say that in reward for this thread, his children received the thread of the tzitzit and its thread of sky-blue; in reward for the shoelace, which was then of leather, the straps of the tefillin. If Avram brought back spoils from this war, these are they: wearing the tefillin, of which it is said that all the peoples will see that the name of the L-rd is called upon you, and wrapping oneself in the tallit. The blue of this thread is that of accumulated transparency, like the sky; to be clothed in it all one's life is the prayer by which every Jew celebrates his identity each morning.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

In the war this people wages, there is never the will to exploit victory materially.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We sometimes accept small things that leave us indebted — a service, a favour. What have we accepted that cost us more than it was worth? And what do we wear each morning that reminds us of what we refused?