

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

LECH LECHA

10 Questions for the Shabbat Table

Ten questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Avraham's War Against the Four Kings: Messianism and the
Kingship of Heaven”: the book of Bereshit as a mirror of history,
a Nimrod who knows the Creator and contests His power, four
kings found again within the Jewish people. Up to what the Rav
says of the Mashiach: we bring him ourselves.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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

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SUBJECT 01

Bereshit, Mirror of History



PRESENTATION

Why does the Torah tell the lives of the patriarchs, and why do we reread the same parashiyot every year? The Rav opens this lecture with this question of method.

THE QUESTION

What are we looking for when we reread Avram's story every year — and is this story ours by choice or in spite of ourselves?

THE ANSWER

The book of Bereshit, called by our Sages “the book of the upright”.

Each year, the cycle of parashiyot takes up again a perspective on the history of Israel among the nations. The patriarchs are individuals who marked a period of history whose repercussions remain burningly relevant: Avram's story is replayed and relived in every era, as are those of Yitzchak, Yaakov and Yosef. This book of the upright, says the Rav, must be translated as the mirror of history — that of the Jewish people and that of all humanity.

We are only Avram, Yitzchak, Yaakov, Yosef and the tribes, no more; and yet the whole history of humanity seems to revolve around us. Are we aware of this participation, or is it imposed on us? Sometimes we think we are the actors of history; then events slip from our grasp and draw us in despite ourselves. A history one did not want, but which was imposed on one, obliges one to take responsibility for it and to claim it.

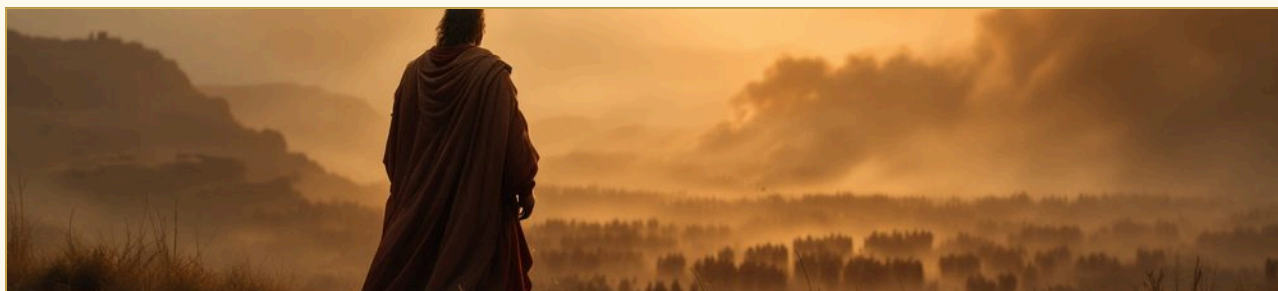
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Avraham's story did not happen just once; it is replayed and relived in each of our eras.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

If the parasha is a mirror, let each person say which episode of Avram's life he feels he relived this year. And what history, imposed on our family, did we end up claiming as our own?

Can One Stay on the Sidelines?



PRESENTATION

It is not Avram who starts this war, the first after two thousand years of history. It is the nations contending for the monopoly of history. Avram enters it only indirectly — and yet he becomes its main actor.

THE QUESTION

Why does Avram find himself at the centre of a war he did not want — and can one stand aside from what is happening in the world?

THE ANSWER

“The fugitive came and told Avram the Hebrew” (Bereshit 14:13).

The nations want to stamp history with their ideology, their outlook, their belief. Avram chose to go all the way and not to bend before the current that sought to isolate spiritual life from national and economic life, and to build a tower and a city run by man alone, without any outside force.

That is why nothing that happens in the world is foreign to the destiny of the Jewish people. Get it out of your heads, says the Rav: we are directly and indirectly involved in every development of humanity. To withdraw behind borders that are purely national, purely spiritual or purely intellectual is to condemn the Jewish people to permanent persecution, in an exile that passes from one stage to the next and forces each generation to re-create itself.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We are directly and indirectly involved in every development of humanity.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

It is tempting to say: “that's none of our business”. What event, far from home, nonetheless concerns us directly? What can we say or do about it, on our own scale?

SUBJECT 03

Nimrod Knows There Is a Creator



PRESENTATION

The leader of the ideology Avram fights is Nimrod. The Rav highlights a surprising trait: Nimrod is not unaware that there is a Creator. He knows it — and claims power all the same.

THE QUESTION

How can one know there is a Creator and contest His keys to history — and why does G-d leave man this possibility?

THE ANSWER

Malchut shamayim: the kingdom of heaven.

Nimrod is aware that the world obeys a supreme consciousness, but he holds that it is not this consciousness that should hold the keys of history: man must take his destiny into his own hands and forge it himself. This is the still-current question of the separation of religion and state. It might perhaps be possible, says the Rav, were it not for events that exceed our forecasts and upset our plans — wars first among them.

The kingdom of heaven brings the whole project of creation back to G-d, but it leaves man the power to choose to be its partner or its opponent. For there is no confirmed kingship unless there is a choice by the people, a free will. Free will is therefore also the power to contest the kingdom of G-d — and Nimrod, who had manipulated the whole society of his time, knew how to use it.

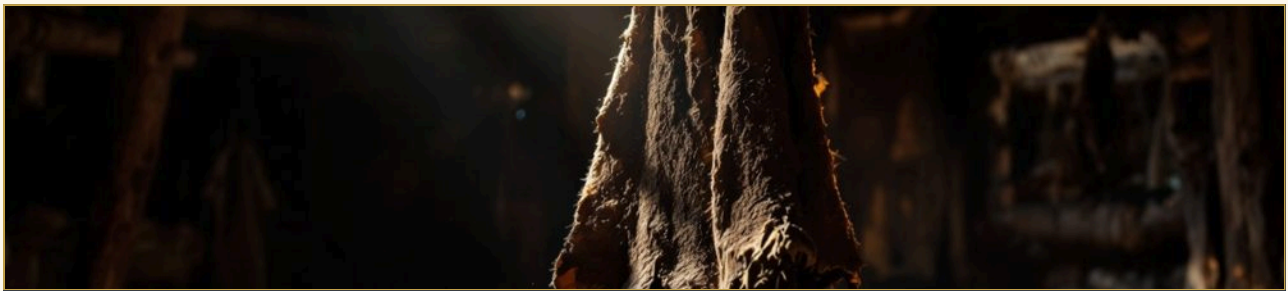
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

There is no confirmed kingship unless there is a choice by the people, unless there is free will.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

A king one did not choose is only a master. In what areas of our life do we truly choose G-d as King — and in which do we manage alone, while knowing that He is there?

Garments of Skin, Garments of Light



PRESENTATION

After Adam's sin, G-d makes garments of skin for the man and his wife. The Rav sees in them the very tool Nimrod used: a garment that separates.

THE QUESTION

What do the “garments of skin” represent — and what should have been done with them?

THE ANSWER

“The L-rd G-d made for Adam and his wife garments of skin” (Bereshit 3:21); Rabbi Meir: garments of light.

The first garment G-d made for man after the sin is opaque: it creates a screen between the creature and his Creator. But, as Rabbi Meir said, these garments of skin — 'or, written with an ayin — were meant to become garments of light — or, written with an aleph. This screen had to be worked until it became as transparent as the sky.

Unfortunately, man used his free will to assert himself before himself and before society, rather than to make the screen transparent. And this even though he is aware of being unable to manage everything, aware of his limits and of the black holes of his own life. It is this screen that Nimrod knew how to use.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

This screen had to be worked so that it would become as transparent as a sky.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Our clothes, our roles, our appearances can hide the light or let it through. What in our home acts as a screen — between us and G-d, or between ourselves? What could we make a little more transparent this week?

The Four Kings Within



PRESENTATION

The war against the four kings has, for the Rav, a messianic character: it places us before the four exiles. Then he turns the question inward: are these four currents not found within the Jewish people itself?

THE QUESTION

Are the four kings fighting Avram only external enemies?

THE ANSWER

The four sons of the Pesach Haggadah; the four expressions of redemption; the four species.

The exiles denied us existence, then life, then our root, then even the right to a land and to our heritage. Yet these currents also exist among us: those for whom the national land is an accessory and who sing the praises of life in exile; those for whom asserting oneself as a Jew should give way to a nationality pure and simple; those who have no interest in the history of the Jewish people, its legacy and its heritage.

The Rav relates an idea he calls wonderful: the four sons of the Haggadah correspond to these four kings who fight Avram. And the number four runs through the festivals: the four expressions of redemption at Pesach, the four modes of reading the Torah — literal, allusive, mystical... — the four species that represent the four tendencies of the community. Messianism is therefore played out within as well as without: among Avram's disciples as among those who broke away from him.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Messianism, which is the object of this war, is a war within the Jewish people as well as outside it.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

At the seder, each of the four sons has his place at the table. Which of these four faces do we recognise in ourselves? And how can we make room in our home for the one who does not resemble us?

Avram Re-creates Himself



PRESENTATION

In appearance, four kings want to subdue five rebel kings. In reality, says the Rav, they form a league against Avram's very existence. How does one man resist such a coalition?

THE QUESTION

Where does Avram's strength come from in the face of those who want to make him disappear?

THE ANSWER

“These are the generations of the heaven and the earth, behibaram” (Bereshit 2:4).

The Rav reads this word, usually translated “when they were created”, as a self-creation: one engenders oneself, one remakes oneself. Avram is someone who re-creates himself. He was thrown into the blazing furnace; he can come back to life from his ashes and make history once again.

For the power he holds is not in the sword: it is in speech, in language. The four kings have armies; Avram has a voice. And this, adds the Rav, is how exile forces each new generation to resize itself, to re-create itself, to regenerate itself.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The power he holds is not in the sword; it is at the level of speech, at the level of language.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We all know moments when we think we have lost everything. What once allowed us to “remake ourselves”? And what word — spoken or received — was our strength rather than a sword?

The Tower of David Against the Tower of Babel



PRESENTATION

The generation of Babel wanted to “build a city and a tower”. The Rav does not reject the very idea of a city and a tower: he sets their true model against them.

THE QUESTION

What city and what tower should have been built — and what happens when the levels of the being function separately?

THE ANSWER

“Let us build ourselves a city and a tower whose top reaches the heavens” (Bereshit 11:4).

The city is the City of David; the tower is the Tower of David: the Sanctuary that joins heaven and earth, spirit and body. It allows us to say that the body is one, with all its components. If these levels function separately, it is a catastrophe.

Like the river that flows out of Eden to water the garden, one must gather things into a single impulse, a single movement of thought, and bring about their unity. This is not done — and that, says the Rav, is Lot's problem: he resembles Avram, but he has already set up limits and separations.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

One must be able to gather things into a single impulse, a single movement of thought, and bring about their unity.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Body, heart, spirit: in our home, which one lives apart from the others — work without prayer, study without kindness? What simple gesture could link two of these levels this week?

The Mashiach We Bring



PRESENTATION

Lot resembles Avram, but he has already set his limits and separations. The Rav makes him a figure of what threatens us too: being a distorted identity of Avram.

THE QUESTION

What is a “false identity” of Avram — and why does the Rav say that we bring the Mashiach ourselves?

THE ANSWER

“The voice is the voice of Yaakov, and the hands are the hands of Esav” (Bereshit 27:22).

We risk being a distorted identity of Avram each time we limit ourselves to one aspect of things, forgetting to see them in their entirety and their unity — in our way of life as in our way of behaving. That is where we can be attacked. The Rav sees in the religions that grew out of Judaism a current of Jewish thought taken in isolation, emphasised while the rest was relegated to second rank: this is what he calls a messianic miscarriage.

For messianism passes through stages, on the personal level and on the collective level. We must stop thinking of a messiah who would come from outside: we bring him ourselves. For this, even when the hands are those of Esav, the voice must be that of Yaakov — the voice of study, of prayer, of communication among all the components, so that a song rises from the whole.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The Mashiach — we bring him ourselves, we make him come.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each of us favours one aspect of Judaism: study, prayer, kindness, family... Which one are we in danger of taking for the whole? And what voice is still missing for our home to sing with one voice?

Hostages of the Spirit



PRESENTATION

The only war Avram wages has a single aim: to recover the hostages. The Rav immediately widens the point: we are not held hostage only physically.

THE QUESTION

Who are the hostages Avram must free — and why is the justice of Sodom a captive too?

THE ANSWER

“He also brought back Lot his brother and his possessions, and also the women and the people” (Bereshit 14:16).

We are held hostage intellectually and spiritually, because we have lost the ease of communicating with those who were one body with us and who, little by little, distanced themselves until they drifted as far as Sodom. It is not a matter of reducing all currents to one, but of subjecting all ideologies and all currents of thought to the sovereignty of heaven.

Lot's choice is no accident: Sodom demands justice without love. If Avram intercedes for Sodom, it is because he judges it defensible: there may be righteous people there, provided windows are opened here and there. But when life is closed off and one no longer wants to move, one ends up at the far extreme from love, as far as the confusion of bonds that Lot's daughters will live through. That is what happens, says the Rav, each time messianism loses its own substance.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We are held hostage, and not only physically: we are held hostage intellectually, we are held hostage spiritually.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

With whom have we “lost the ease of communicating” — a relative, a friend who drifted away? What window could we reopen this week to resume the dialogue?

Nothing to Expect, and Yet the Tithe



PRESENTATION

People want to shower Avram with gifts and gratitude; he refuses. Then the text says, concerning Malki-Tzedek: “he gave him a tithe of everything”. The commentators ask who gave to whom.

THE QUESTION

Why does Avram refuse any reward — and why, if he gives the tithe, does he do so?

THE ANSWER

“And he gave him a tithe of everything” (Bereshit 14:20).

From this struggle there is nothing to expect. One cannot demand it of everyone, the Rav acknowledges: some use belief to improve their situation or meet a need, and that is a favour one may ask. But it cannot found a reality of its own. G-d, for His part, gave a world and a Garden of Eden, like a father ready to give everything to his child: a world founded on kindness at every level, with nothing in return.

As for the tithe, some commentators say it was Avram who gave it. He does not do so to assert himself before others, but to serve the sovereignty of G-d: to teach the world to claim His name, to claim His presence, to join Him to the destiny of His creation. That is the messianism of this chapter, up to the promise to give the peoples a clear language, so that all may call by the same name.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The world is founded on giving kindness at every level, but with nothing in return.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Do we do good while expecting something back — recognition, a thank-you, a favour? Let each person think of a gift he could give this week without anyone knowing.