

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

LECH LECHA

11 Questions for the Shabbat Table

Eleven questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture "Lech Lecha: The Dialogue of Revelation": the name of the One who set limits, a vision that calls for translation, three covenants of which only one is inscribed in the flesh, and a letter added to Avram's name. Up to this reversal: after the covenant, it is Avraham who reveals G-d.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

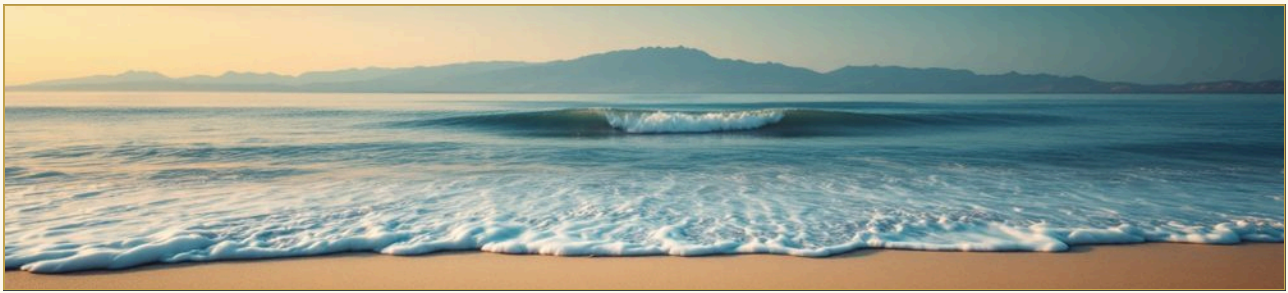
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Themes for reflection and questions to share around the Lech Lecha table

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SUBJECT 01

El Shaddai: The One Who Set Limits



PRESENTATION

Avram is ninety-nine years old when G-d presents Himself to him by the name El Shaddai. This is how Avram had first perceived Him: as the Creator, the One who answers the question of the origin of all things.

THE QUESTION

What does the name El Shaddai say — and what is the only domain that escapes all limits?

THE ANSWER

“I am El Shaddai; walk before Me and be whole” (Bereshit 17:1).

I could have expanded, this name says in substance, and I imposed limits. They exist at every level: in the physical laws of nature, in logic, in the emotions. We do not all have the same way of feeling the world, perceiving it, seeing it; in the knowledge of G-d too, it is each according to his capacities, and some are content with an elementary faith: that is their limit. This name that sets limits is the one we inscribe on the doorways of our homes.

The only domain without limit is time: an opening onto the infinite, onto the beyond. One reaches it more through commitment and action than through thought. The Rav does not belittle thought — a faith that is thought through has more impact, it can be transmitted, it is open to dialogue — but it is not enough to cross the limit.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is an opening onto the beyond, which one can reach more through commitment, through action, than through thought.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each person has his limits, in faith as elsewhere. Do we know how to respect the “elementary faith” of someone close to us? And what concrete commitment could move us forward where reflection is marking time?

From Saying to Dialogue



PRESENTATION

The text says that the word of G-d came to Avram “in a vision”, machazeh. Our Sages note that this verb is the one Aramaic prefers. The Rav draws from it a reflection on translation — and on speech.

THE QUESTION

Why does a distant vision need to be translated — and how does circumcision give access to speech?

THE ANSWER

“The word of the L-rd came to Avram in a vision” (Bereshit 15:1).

Chazo means to see, like ra'ah; but chazo designates a vision much farther away than the human field of sight, and for that very reason somewhat blurred: it needs a translation. Now whoever does not understand the original needs the translation, while for whoever understands the original, the translation narrows the field of interpretation. It is this passage that takes place through circumcision.

The circumcision of the being, says the Rav, gives man access to speech, to the transparency of speech, to dialogue. As long as we remain in mere saying, each person asserts what he wants, and our opinions diverge. True speech presupposes a dialogue, that we are interested in the same subject, and that we want to reach a language that agrees and makes peace. This is a second stage of faith.

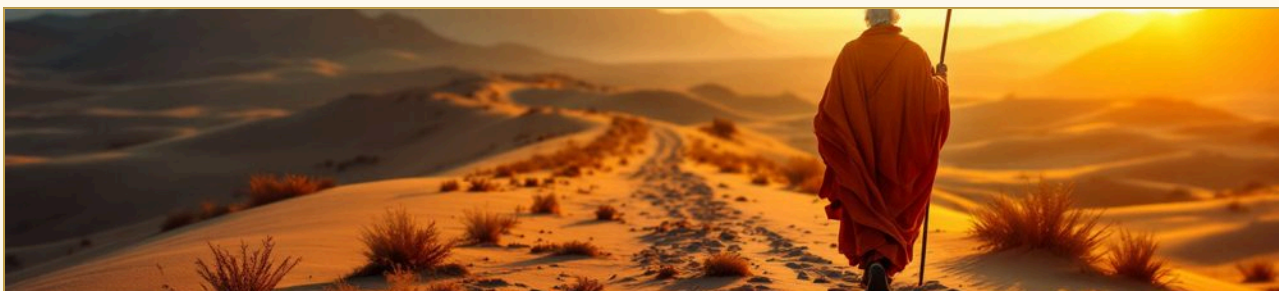
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

As long as we remain in mere saying, each says what he wants, each asserts what he wants.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

At the table, do we speak each in turn, or do we truly dialogue? Let us choose a single subject tonight, and let each person respond to what the previous one said rather than to his own idea.

“Walk Before Me and Be Whole”



PRESENTATION

Before asking for circumcision, G-d says to Avram: walk before Me and be whole, tamim. The Rav reads in this the whole difference between waiting for revelation and going out to meet it — and the whole difference between Noach and Avraham.

THE QUESTION

Why must one not wait for revelation — and what does the word “whole” really ask?

THE ANSWER

“Walk before Me and be whole” (Bereshit 17:1); “Noach found favour in the eyes of the L-rd” (Bereshit 6:8).

Not practising circumcision means considering that nature, as it is made, is perfect and must not be touched. Yet perfection in the natural order is impossible: to move the world forward, contradictory but complementary forces are needed. Noach was content with the favour he had found — and we know how he ended his days with his children. He will be the father of humanity; he will not be creation. Avraham is creation: behibaram, “when they were created”, is written with the letters of his name; creation rests upon him, and he can give it another face.

Seek perfection, says the text: you will not reach it, you will remain halfway, but you will have had the merit of walking at your own pace, according to your own strength. What holds revelation back, adds the Rav, is laziness and sadness: when one is sad, one wants nothing; when one feels good in oneself, one wants things to succeed and move forward.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

You will not reach it, you are halfway, but you will still have had the merit of walking at your own pace, according to your own strength.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What are we waiting for before we begin — a sign, a better mood, the right moment? Let each person choose a small step to take this week, at his own pace, without waiting to be perfect.

Three Covenants, and Something More



PRESENTATION

The Rav distinguishes three covenants: that of the rainbow, that of Shabbat, that of circumcision. Circumcision, he says, has “something more” than the other two.

THE QUESTION

What distinguishes these three covenants — and what more does the covenant of milah, inscribed in the flesh, have?

THE ANSWER

“My covenant shall be in your flesh an everlasting covenant” (Bereshit 17:13).

The covenant of the rainbow is that of space: it binds all humanity and recalls that the world runs the risk of a flood. The Jewish people is concerned by two others. That of Shabbat is the covenant of time: it takes one out of the ordinary calendar, out of time cut up and limited. That of circumcision is the covenant of being.

This last is a brit olam inscribed in the flesh, a covenant that nothing can annul. So much so that a Jew who decided not to have the milah remains Jewish: he is at fault, but he does not cease to belong. A child who had lost his parents and had no one to perform it for him falls to the representatives of the community; failing that, he will have to do it himself once he is an adult, because by his origins he belongs to the descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. And just as the covenant is everlasting, the land is promised “as an everlasting possession”: an exile, however long, does not forfeit its benefit.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Just as he carries the milah within him, he carries the land within him.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Time, space, being: three covenants. Which one do we live most consciously in our family? And how can we make a child feel that his belonging comes before what he does?

A Re-creation of the Being



PRESENTATION

The word brit, covenant, is close to beriah, the creature, creation. One must not think, says the Rav, that the circumcised man is merely someone who has undergone a minor operation.

THE QUESTION

Why is circumcision a re-creation — and why did Avraham have to perform it himself, when other righteous men were born circumcised?

THE ANSWER

“At eight days old, every male among you shall be circumcised” (Bereshit 17:12).

True circumcision brings about a re-creation of the being. That is why, performed on the eighth day, it calls for going beyond the natural order, and even overrides Shabbat. But if the child is not well enough, it is postponed: one is not going to deprive him of the chance to keep many Shabbatot.

The righteous who preceded Avraham were born circumcised: they enjoyed a certain grace. Avraham was not, because the hallmark of spiritual life is not to benefit from favourable outward conditions. On the contrary, it is the investment of oneself that matters most: G-d reveals Himself in the measure of what a man commits of his own person to discover Him.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

G-d reveals Himself in the measure of the investment of our person in discovering Him.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Some have “received everything”, others have had to conquer everything. Let each person name one thing he had to acquire by himself — and appreciates all the more for it.

The Word Order Is Reversed



PRESENTATION

Before the covenant, the text says: “the L-rd appeared to Avram”. After it, at the beginning of the next chapter: “He appeared to him, the L-rd”. The Rav pauses over this reversal.

THE QUESTION

What does the change in word order in the two verses of revelation mean?

THE ANSWER

“Vayera Hashem el Avram” (Bereshit 17:1); “Vayera elav Hashem” (Bereshit 18:1).

In the first verse, the Divine name comes first: the L-rd manifests Himself from above to below; He reveals Himself to Avram. After the circumcision, it is “to him” that comes first, and the Name afterwards. Once the circumcision has been performed, says the Rav, it is Avraham who reveals the L-rd.

The dialogue has changed direction. For the milah comes to orient our field of vision, to silence the noise of the world, to make us sensitive to another music, another word, another language; to make us see and perceive things differently. The one who received the revelation becomes the place through which it makes itself known.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Once the circumcision has been performed, it is Avraham who reveals Hashem.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Do we only receive, or do we also pass on what we have received? Through whom, in our family, have we “seen” something of G-d?

Father of a Multitude, Not Head of an Elite



PRESENTATION

Avram becomes Avraham: “father of a multitude of nations”. The Rav reads this change of name as a change of mission.

THE QUESTION

What does Avram lose and what does Avraham gain by changing his name?

THE ANSWER

“Your name shall no longer be called Avram; your name shall be Avraham, for I make you the father of a multitude of nations” (Bereshit 17:5).

What I want to make of you, the text says in substance, is not Avram: an elite placed above everyone and entering into no relationship with the world. Stay in the throng of nations, but remain their father — a father who loves his children, who thinks of their future, who is capable of sacrificing everything for them. Not a chosen one turned in on himself, but a chosen one who is responsible, an envoy, a delegate of G-d among the nations.

This amounts to accepting every criticism and every persecution: you will always be in the midst of the peoples, always the focus of the other peoples' gaze. And yet it is through circumcision that you will be father of the nations, and from you will come those who will represent the Divine kingship on earth, such as David and Shlomo.

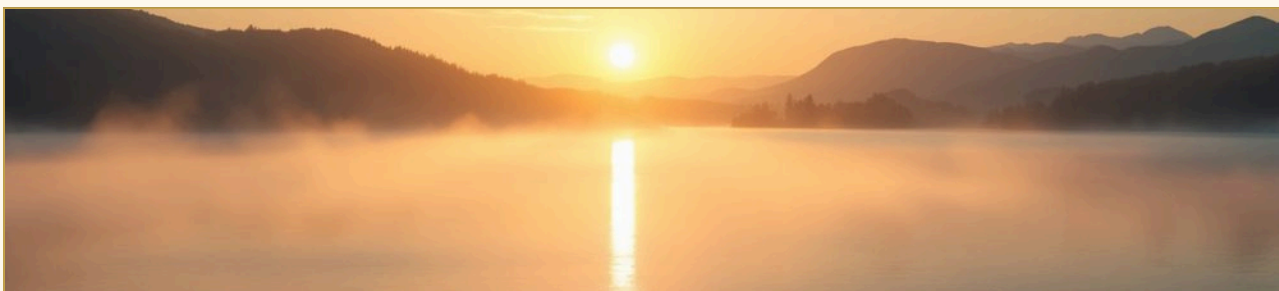
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

I do not want you to turn in on yourself and feel like a chosen one of G-d who has nothing to do with the others.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Being “chosen” can make one proud or responsible. How does our family stand among others: apart, or like an attentive father? Let each person suggest a gesture toward “the others” this week.

A Letter Added to a Name



PRESENTATION

Avram becomes Avraham through the addition of a single letter, a hei. The Rav seeks where this letter comes from, and what it now forbids.

THE QUESTION

What is this added letter — and why must Avraham no longer be called “Avram”, when Yaakov also remains Yaakov?

THE ANSWER

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

It is the letter by which the world was created: in the verse of the generations of heaven and earth, the hei is suspended, written small. It is a letter that is not articulated, that is only a breath, and that expresses purpose, determination. This is the letter G-d brings into play by giving it to Avraham. Our Sages add that hei is worth five: the two eyes, the two ears and the organ of the covenant — what we manage least to master.

Hence a consequence: whoever called Avraham “Avram” would commit a transgression. Yet we changed Yaakov's name to Israel, and we use both; but one is the support of the other, its inspiration. Avraham, however, was converted entirely: he is the first who dared this conversion of his own person. That is what G-d did in creating the world; that is what man does on his own scale when he chooses to be a servant of G-d.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Avraham is the first who dared to carry out this conversion of his own person.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

A name says what we are called to become. Let each person tell the story of his Hebrew name — and say what “letter” he would like to add to it this year.

Aner, Eshkol and Mamre



PRESENTATION

Our Sages relate that Avraham consulted his three companions, Aner, Eshkol and Mamre, before performing the circumcision. The Rav sees in this a question that still arises today.

THE QUESTION

Should we put off a requirement that risks raising a barrier between us and others?

THE ANSWER

“Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eshkol and brother of Aner, Avram's allies” (Bereshit 14:13).

As long as Avraham stays at the level of universal law, his word is heard: his dialogue with the nations succeeds; he has brought back a multitude of people. Should he then be accommodating, let things come, simplify, go along with universal ideas, and put off this practice that will form a barrier? Serving G-d by teaching the universal laws is also very praiseworthy, isn't it?

Aner and Eshkol oppose it; only Mamre tells him to go ahead. There are no half-measures on the path of spirituality: one must go all the way. Those who can follow will follow; those who stay behind will move forward at their own pace, and one day perhaps they will catch up. But requirements must not be lowered to practise a mass Judaism.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

There are no half-measures on the path of spirituality.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Have we ever given up a practice because it set us too much apart? Let each person name a requirement he keeps, even when it makes him “different”, and what it gives him.

Sarai Becomes Sarah



PRESENTATION

After Avraham, it is Sarai who changes her name. The Rav takes the opportunity to answer an objection: does circumcision concern only the man?

THE QUESTION

What does the passage from Sarai to Sarah change — and what part does the woman have in the covenant?

THE ANSWER

“Sarai your wife, you shall no longer call her Sarai, for Sarah is her name” (Bereshit 17:15); “the wife of your covenant” (Malachi 2:14).

The prophet speaks of “the wife of your covenant”: the wife is like the man’s body, they are one and the same entity, and the circumcision the man performs, he performs for two, for himself and for the one joined to him.

And Sarai passes, like Avraham, from the relative to the universal. Sarai is “my princess”, with a possessive ending; Sarah is a princess for all. The text announces that she will be the origin of kings, that is, of those who will manifest the Divine kingship in this world. Asked about this point, however, the Rav specifies that there is no universal mother as there is a universal father: mothers remain particular to their children.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

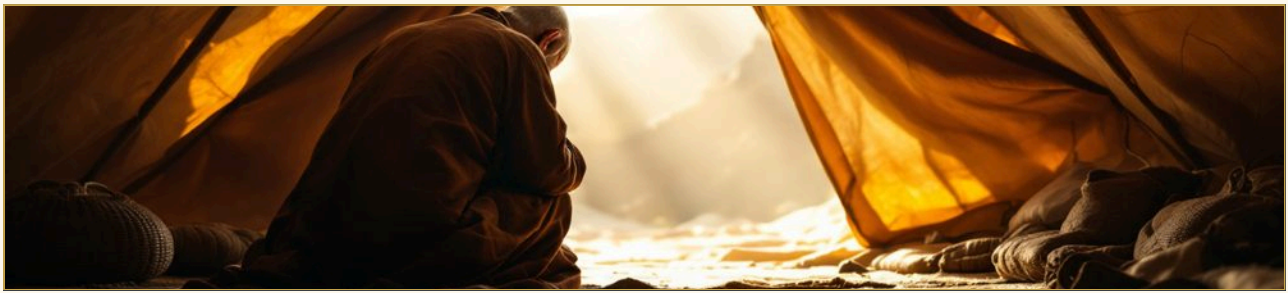
He performs the circumcision for two: for himself and for his wife.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In a couple, the commitments of one bind the other. What decision in our home was made “for two”? And how did each find his or her place in it?

SUBJECT 11

Laughter in the Heart



PRESENTATION

Avraham falls on his face a first time when G-d speaks to him of the covenant; a second time, he falls and laughs, on learning that Sarah will bear a child. But the text adds: “he said in his heart”.

THE QUESTION

Why does Avraham laugh — and why does the Rav express a reservation about what he says “in his heart”?

THE ANSWER

“Avraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart” (Bereshit 17:17); “the fool has said in his heart” (Tehillim 14:1).

The first time, it is the self effacing itself before the Divine demand, concerning the very organ of reproduction, the one that ensures the continuity of creation. The second time, he sees Yitzchak and he is glad: Yitzchak's name is in the future tense, he will laugh, he will laugh in what is to come.

But “he said in his heart”: brooding over thoughts without daring to express them, to release them, is not good. It is the attitude Scripture attributes to the fool, who says in his heart what he dares not declare. The righteous man masters his bad vibrations. Do I deserve this, at a hundred? Don't ask yourself the question, move forward. And Avraham ends up releasing his speech: he asks that Yishmael too have his chance.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The righteous man masters his vibrations, the bad vibrations in his heart.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What do we brood over in silence without daring to say it? Let each person voice aloud a question or a fear he keeps to himself — and let the others help him “move forward with it”.