

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

LECH LECHA

10 Questions for the Shabbat Table

Ten questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture "Lech Lecha: Avraham's Journey": an order to leave "for yourself", an altar at Shechem, a tent written in the feminine, and the three deviations Avraham fought between the ages of three and seventy-five. Up to this promise: you will not see more, you will see differently.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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“Go for Yourself”



PRESENTATION

The first words of the parasha are an order to depart: leave your land, your birthplace, your father's house. The Rav pauses over the very translation of these words, and over the land to which Avram must go — a land the verse does not name.

THE QUESTION

What does an order given “for yourself” mean — and toward what land does one set out when it has not yet been described?

THE ANSWER

“Go for yourself, from your land, from your birthplace and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you” (Bereshit 12:1).

“Go for yourself” is first understood as an order given for the benefit of the one who receives it: go for your own good, for your fulfillment. And the land he must go to is not only the one “that I will show you”: it is the one where I will reveal Myself to you. From the very outset, then, the text binds together moving on and revelation.

The promises follow: I will make you a great nation, I will bless you, I will make your name great, you will be a blessing; I will bless those who bless you, and those who curse you or take you lightly, I will curse; through you all the families of the earth will be blessed. Everything, says the Rav, is already contained in these first verses: greatness, the goodness that governs the world, each person's investment in the service of G-d.

And “I will make your name great” means perpetuating an existence: this name of Israel, which must inspire respect. Avram leaves as he was commanded, at seventy-five, and Lot joins him of his own free will.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

To the land — not simply that I will show you, but where I will reveal Myself to you.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Are our moves — a new city, a new job, a new stage of life — departures “for our own good”? Let each person tell of a change he first had to endure, and which in the end revealed something to him.

Shechem: The Land and the Altar



PRESENTATION

Avram crosses the country without stopping until Shechem. It is there, and not before, that G-d appears to him for the first time and promises the land to his descendants. Avram immediately builds an altar there.

THE QUESTION

Why does the first revelation take place at Shechem — and why does Avram answer the promise of a land with an altar?

THE ANSWER

“The L-rd appeared to Avram and said: to your descendants I will give this land; and he built there an altar to the L-rd who had appeared to him” (Bereshit 12:7).

The text specifies that Avram set out for Canaan without stopping on the way, without turning aside, and then passed through the land as far as the place of Shechem. Now Shechem is the place of Mount Gerizim and Mount Eival, where the covenant between G-d and the Jewish people will be reaffirmed over the charter of the Torah — but this time with an oath. Until then there had been no manifestation: Shechem marks a real turning point in taking possession of the land.

And Avram builds an altar there. He had understood, says the Rav, that this land could only be justified — that ownership could only be justified — by the altar he was raising. It is not a title deed that grounds possession, but what one builds upon it — and this to give greater resonance to his movement, physical as well as spiritual.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Ownership could only be justified by the altar he was raising.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Is what we own — a house, a profession, a name — justified by what we build upon it? What would be the “altar” of our home, the thing that gives it its meaning? Let each person suggest an answer.

The Peel and the Fruit



PRESENTATION

Avram has barely arrived when the text adds a detail: “the Canaanite was then in the land”. The promised land is already occupied, and will long remain so, by neighbours who do not want him.

THE QUESTION

Why does the Torah mention the Canaanite at the very moment of the promise — and what does a hostile neighbourhood represent for Israel?

THE ANSWER

“The Canaanite was then in the land” (Bereshit 12:6).

Whether we like it or not, answers the Rav, just as fruit is surrounded by a peel, the Jewish people is surrounded by various peels, and always will be. And everything depends on the fruit: the nature of the peel depends on the state of the fruit it surrounds.

Yet the peel protects the fruit. Our enemies are thus destined, in a certain way, to be our protectors, so that we can fulfil ourselves from within. The hostile neighbourhood is therefore not merely an obstacle on Avram's road: it is what holds in, what forces the fruit to ripen under shelter.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Our enemies are destined to be our protectors, so that we can fulfil ourselves from within.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Around every family there are oppositions and hostilities. Which one, without meaning to, forced us to draw closer together and to mature? And the fruit, in our home — is it in good condition?

Between Beit-El and Ai, His Wife's Tent



PRESENTATION

From Shechem, Avram moves on toward the mountain and pitches his tent, with Beit-El to the west and Ai to the east. Two details hold the Rav's attention: the spelling of the word "his tent", and the name of Ai, which will return at the time of the conquest.

THE QUESTION

Why does the text write "his tent" in the feminine — and why point out, as early as Avram, the city of Ai?

THE ANSWER

"He pitched his tent, Beit-El to the west and Ai to the east" (Bereshit 12:8).

Avram is the mountain: compared with the patriarchs he set on their way, he is the difficult approach, reserved for an elite, as his name Avram, father of an elite, says. And yet, up there, his tent is written in the feminine: her tent, his wife's tent. Before there is a meeting place between the Divine and man, there is first the meeting place of a man and his wife. That, says the Rav, says a great deal.

Nor is the geographical detail a mere map reference. Ai is the place where, during the conquest of the promised land, an incident occurs, a desecration of the Divine name. This tells us that this land, even in its conquest, must be taken with moral and spiritual demands in mind.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Before there is a meeting place of the Divine and man, there is first that of a man and his wife.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The home is the first sanctuary. What, in our house, makes the tent "the other's tent" — a place where each person feels welcome? And what moral demand would we never want to sacrifice, even in order to succeed?

SUBJECT 05

Naming a Place, Not Judging a Man on the Move



PRESENTATION

On the mountain, Avram builds a second altar and “calls in the name of the L-rd”. Then he sets off again, still toward the south. The Rav pauses over this act of naming, and over this journey that has not yet reached its end.

THE QUESTION

What does Avram do when he “calls in the name of the L-rd” over a place — and why must one never pass verdict on a man as long as he is walking?

THE ANSWER

“He built there an altar to the L-rd and called in the name of the L-rd. And Avram journeyed, going on and travelling toward the Negev” (Bereshit 12:8-9).

The second altar does not serve the purpose of the first: the first was for the revelation, this one for the promise of the land. And just as Adam gave a name to all the beings around him, Avram here identifies the place, the makom. The makom is the place where a being flourishes; that is why it is also a Divine attribute: it encompasses everything, and from there the name of G-d spreads.

To name is to state either the present nature of a thing or its project. Here it is the project: Avram has landed in this country, but he has not found his permanent residence; he is still in the movement of lech lecha, and he is always heading toward Yerushalayim.

So it is with a man: as long as he is walking, we have no business saying he is this or that; we do not know what he will become. Only one earned a Divine attribute in his lifetime: Yitzchak, since one swears by “the Fear of Yitzchak”.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

As long as a man is on the move, we hope he will always be evolving for the better.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We are quick to say of a child, a brother or ourselves: “that’s just how he is”. What judgment have we passed too early on someone who was still walking? And what name — what project — would we give our home?

Three Gates, Three Principles



PRESENTATION

The Rav leaves the narrative for a moment to look at the structure of faith. Our Sages speak of three gates of Gehinnom: in the sea, in the desert, in Yerushalayim. He reads in them three dangers, answered by three principles.

THE QUESTION

What do these three gates of Gehinnom tell us — and what are the three principles of faith that answer them?

THE ANSWER

Our Sages: three gates open onto Gehinnom — in the desert, in the sea, in Yerushalayim.

The gate of the sea is the one that sought to swallow Yonah, the prophet charged with bringing the word to the nations. Water is formless: it takes the shape of the vessel it is poured into, otherwise it spreads in every direction, always downhill; for it to take shape, earth is needed. The gate of the desert is the one that swallowed Korach and his followers, those who contest the Divine order. The gate of Yerushalayim opens when one denies that a providence watches over the world from that place: the city becomes the prey of the nations that lay claim to it.

Three principles answer them. There is a Creator and a Master of the world. Since this world exists, He must give us the recipe for how it works: that is the Torah, given precisely in the desert. And Yerushalayim is the dwelling place of the Divine Presence. The Rav notes that the text says three times that the people had faith: on receiving the Torah, on crossing the sea, and when the land was promised to them.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is not because G-d exists that He must manifest Himself; it is because a world exists that He must give us the recipe for how that world works.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Water without a vessel sweeps everything away. What are the “vessels” of our home — the rhythms, the rules, the places — that give shape to our life? Which one has cracked a little lately?

Grazing on the Torah or Digging Into It



PRESENTATION

That there is a Creator, says the Rav, is almost self-evident: before a perfectly organised work, one cannot invoke chance. One may even wonder whether this still deserves the name of faith. Where, then, does faith begin?

THE QUESTION

Where does faith begin, if the existence of a Creator is self-evident — and what is the difference between gleaning the Torah and digging into it?

THE ANSWER

“As the ox licks up the grass of the field” (Bamidbar 22:4): the image the Rav applies to a certain way of studying.

Faith begins when one goes beyond the obvious: when one considers that of everything we have only ever perceived the outside, and that the earth, the sea and the heavens keep treasures in their depths that call us to search. Just as scientific investment bears fruit, so does spiritual investment, and first of all in the study of Torah.

Yet sometimes we are content to harvest the Torah and glean it, as the ox grazes its grass: when there is none left, it goes elsewhere, looking for another region to find its food. True faith is the faith that does not stop at the natural product placed before us, as if it exhausted reality, but searches for what lies buried within.

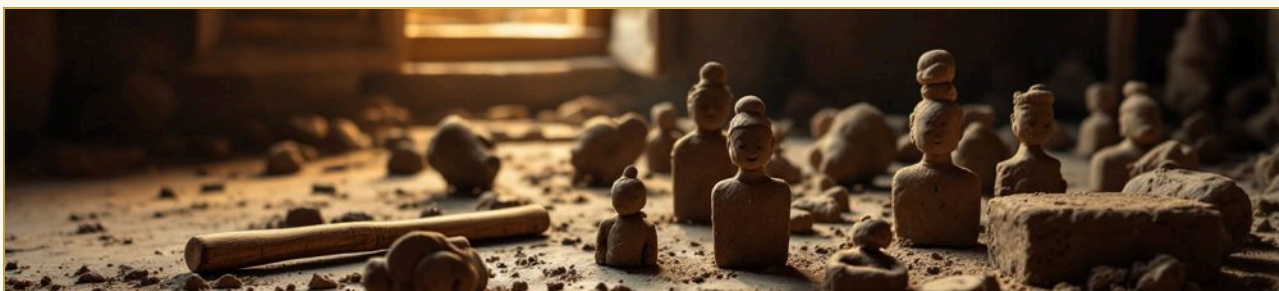
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

True faith is the faith that does not stop at the natural product in front of us.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

When we study, do we graze or do we dig? Let each person choose a verse he thinks he knows by heart, and let us look together for what it may still be hiding.

An Idolatry of Four Hundred Chapters



PRESENTATION

Our Sages relate that Avraham's treatise on idolatry had four hundred chapters, and that only five remain to us. The Rav draws a first lesson from this: the word "idolatry" is too weak for what Avraham fought.

THE QUESTION

What does avodah zarah, "foreign worship", really designate — and foreign to whom?

THE ANSWER

Avodah zarah: literally, "foreign worship".

In Hebrew, avodah zarah is the worship of everything that is foreign. Foreign to whom? First of all to oneself. For I cannot objectify things if I have not internalised them: I am built of matter and spirit, and it is this blend that allows me to grasp the universe G-d created. What I have not taken into myself, what remains outside, can become an idol.

That is why Avraham's struggle cannot be reduced to smashing a few statues. It concerns every way of venerating what has not been internalised — the forces of nature, ideas, systems — and it is so vast that four hundred chapters were needed to describe it. These temptations were common then, says the Rav; they are today, and they will be tomorrow.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

I cannot objectify things if I have not internalised them.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What do we admire without having truly made it our own — a fashion, an opinion, a model of success? Let each person name one thing he "serves" a little too much, and which deep down remains foreign to him.

Enosh, the Flood, Babel: Three Ways of Missing Faith



PRESENTATION

Avraham, it is said, began his search at the age of three; G-d calls him only at seventy-five. In between, he waged the struggle against three deviations, three forms of idolatry, inherited from three generations.

THE QUESTION

What are these three deviations Avraham fought — and why does the Rav say they are still ours?

THE ANSWER

“Then they began to call in the name of the L-rd” (Bereshit 4:26), read as a profanation; “the earth was filled with violence” (Bereshit 6:11).

The first is that of the generation of Enosh: fixing all one's thought on the derivatives of creation and of thought rather than going back to the source. It is easier to speak of the plural manifestations of the Divine — in ideas, nature, science — than to entrust oneself to the Being who encompasses everything.

The second is that of the Flood: leaving man to what he feels, to what he desires, and rejecting the principle that binds the forces to their single source; the world becomes formless, like water without a dam sweeping everything away. The third is that of the dispersion, in the time of Nimrod: separating the spiritual from the material, managing oneself without any higher will. Yet they had the language of the sacred; they cut it off from its source.

It is taught that Avraham began to search at three, the age of the first haircut, when the peyot are kept: that portion of spirituality from which a new seed will spring. Alone in a sea of humanity, he holds firm.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

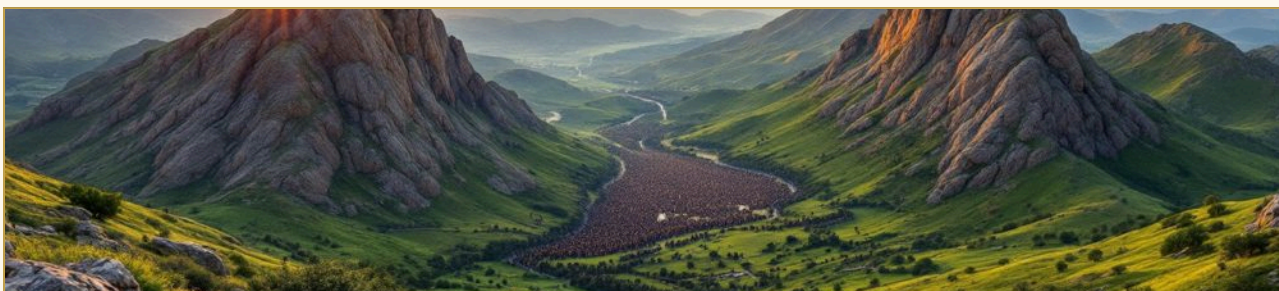
This language, just as it was the language of creation, was also the language of revelation.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Breaking things into pieces, permitting everything, managing everything alone: which of these three temptations threatens our family most today? Let each person answer for himself before answering for others.

SUBJECT 10

An Oath That Binds



PRESENTATION

To conclude, the Rav returns to the verse of departure, “the land that I will show you”, and links it to what will happen centuries later at Shechem: an oath pronounced between two mountains, on entering the land.

THE QUESTION

What is left to show a man who already knows how to see — and why was a new covenant needed on entering the land, when everything had been said at Sinai?

THE ANSWER

“Cursed is he who will not uphold the words of this Torah” (Devarim 27:26).

“I will show you” does not promise to see more: Avram already knows how to see. He will see differently, discover a new perspective, reach an inner vision instead of settling for an outer one. But one reaches this vision, says the Rav, only by internalising the oath of the covenant pronounced on Gerizim and Eival, six tribes on one side, six on the other and the Levites in the middle.

Why this new covenant? The Torah of Sinai left each person his latitude: one is zealous, another takes one part and leaves another aside, without thereby being outside the people of Israel. But the verb “to swear” in Hebrew takes a reflexive form, that of an action that turns back on oneself: I am carried along, moved by the commitment itself. On this land that was given to him, there is no other way to live than within the framework of the Torah.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

You know well how to see things, but you are going to see things differently.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There are commitments we take on, and others that take us on. Which one in our life now “carries us along” without our having to think about it? And what do we see differently since we have kept it?