

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

LECH LECHA

9 Questions for the Shabbat Table

Nine questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture "Lech Lecha: Man's Relationship with G-d": a man who proved the existence of the Creator and whom the text at last declares a believer, a faith that preceded creation, an Adam diminished after the sin. Up to this definition of kindness: growing enough for the other to find himself in me.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

Table of Topics

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

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- | | |
|-----------|---|
| 01 | Two Thousand Years for One Believer |
| <hr/> | |
| 02 | Faith, the Dwelling Place of Truth |
| <hr/> | |
| 03 | Adam, from One End of the World to the Other |
| <hr/> | |
| 04 | Why the Serpent Speaks to the Woman |
| <hr/> | |
| 05 | One Does Not Sow in Thin Air |
| <hr/> | |
| 06 | Why Jewish History Begins in Exile |
| <hr/> | |
| 07 | Shield of Avraham |
| <hr/> | |
| 08 | “For My Sake the World Was Created” |
| <hr/> | |
| 09 | Lending to G-d |
| <hr/> | |

SUBJECT 01

Two Thousand Years for One Believer



PRESENTATION

Avram is worried: what good is a land if he has no child? G-d takes him outside and shows him the stars. Then the text says: he believed in the L-rd, and He counted it to him as tzedakah.

THE QUESTION

How can the text say of Avram that he believed, when he spends his life proving to unbelievers that there is a Creator?

THE ANSWER

“He believed in the L-rd, and He counted it to him as tzedakah” (Bereshit 15:6); “You found his heart faithful before You” (Nechemiah 9:8).

It took two thousand years from creation before a believer at last appeared. Until then, Avram would demonstrate step by step, before the unbelievers of his time, that the world answers to a creative will and is the product neither of chance nor of nature. They listened without following him: a man without children, people told themselves, would not last. It is at the moment when he wonders about his descendants that the text declares him a believer.

For if one comes to faith from a demonstrated truth, it is no longer faith: it is a logical conclusion. Men arrive at solid scientific or philosophical convictions and remain inhabited by doubt. Faith belongs to the being's own feeling: if there is one thing I do not doubt, it is that I exist — not because I understand it, but because I am hungry, because I suffer, because I love. That is why it is said of Avram: You found his heart faithful.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is his heart that is faithful — not his logic, not his quest for truth.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We readily believe what we have proved. Whom or what did we trust this year without proof? And what in our life makes us certain that we exist?

SUBJECT 02

Faith, the Dwelling Place of Truth



PRESENTATION

In the evening prayer, *emet ve-emunah*, truth and faith, are joined together. One might be tempted to conclude that the quest for truth leads to faith. The Rav reverses the order.

THE QUESTION

Does truth lead to faith, or is faith the condition of truth — and what does it mean that faith preceded creation?

THE ANSWER

***“Emet ve-emunah”:* truth and faith (evening prayer).**

Faith is the dwelling place of truth. Without faith, how would I reach truth? And even if I discovered it, I would not practise it as soon as it contradicted my interests, my feelings or my desire. Truth needs a place to stand.

Our Sages teach, moreover, that G-d placed His trust in His creation. He feared that the laws of nature might start to run out of control; He wondered whether this world should be created, and He created it because He gave it credit. Faith therefore preceded creation. And the charter of this creation was the Torah: G-d drew the world according to its data, and trusted it to remain true to this architecture, not to go out of order.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

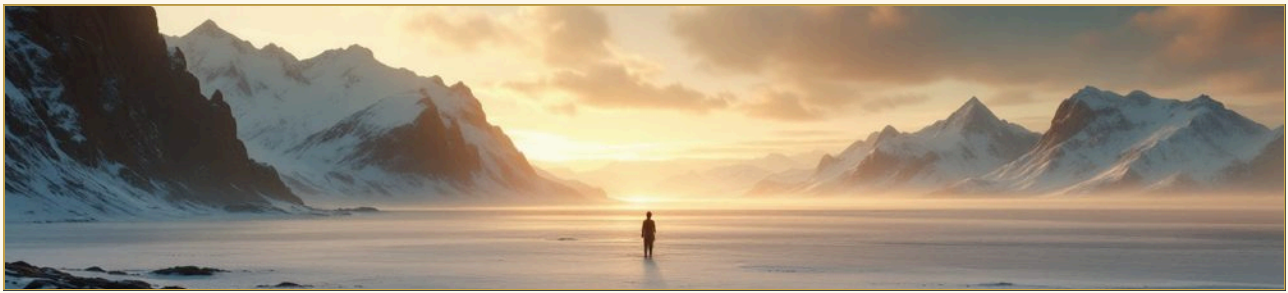
No truth can stand without faith, since faith is the dwelling place of truth.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We all know truths we do not practise, because they disturb us. Which one? And to whom in our family do we give “credit”, as G-d does to His creation?

SUBJECT 03

Adam, from One End of the World to the Other



PRESENTATION

What could throw creation out of order was man: the being who contains within himself all the data of nature. Our Sages say that Adam extended from one end of the world to the other.

THE QUESTION

Why could man throw the whole of creation out of order — and what does he lose when he is “diminished”?

THE ANSWER

“Upon the likeness of the throne was a likeness like the appearance of a man” (Yechezkel 1:26).

Man was created in the image of G-d, and this is what Yechezkel's vision confirms: on the heavenly throne sits the likeness of a man. This likeness embraced the whole phenomenon of creation. From then on, if man did not recognise himself in his Creator, he would throw creation out of order — and that is what happened: the first Adam sinned.

This first Adam had a universal dimension: he was truly the Divine project of creation. After the sin, he was diminished to a hundred cubits, and he could no longer find his bearings. His power of perception was extinguished, his world shrank, he became limited. And faith, at the same stroke, was damaged.

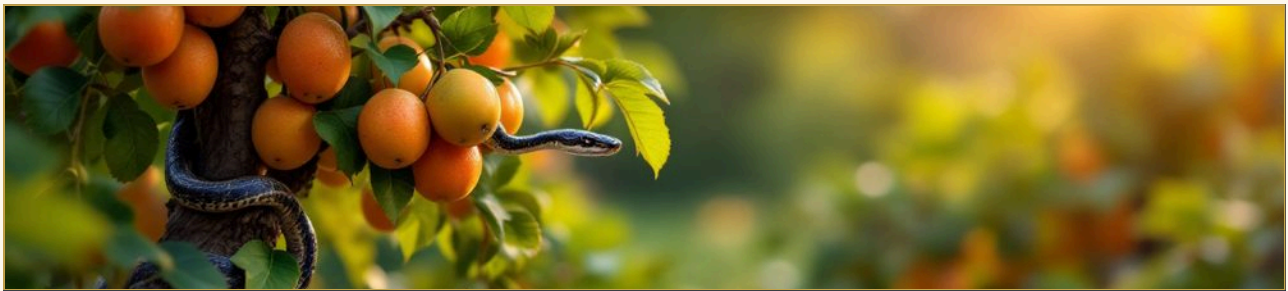
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

If man did not recognise himself in his Creator, he would indeed throw creation out of order.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We sometimes feel “diminished”, unable to find our bearings. What in our home shrinks our world — tiredness, screens, habit? And what widens it?

Why the Serpent Speaks to the Woman



PRESENTATION

In the account of the garden, the serpent first addresses the woman, and it is she who will persuade the man. The Rav relies on a remark of the Zohar to explain this choice.

THE QUESTION

Why does the serpent go after the woman first — and what link is there between the woman and faith?

THE ANSWER

The Zohar: truth is spoken in the masculine, faith in the feminine.

The Zohar notes that truth, *emet*, is set in the masculine, while faith, *emunah*, is in the feminine. Why? Because the woman is the one who agrees to receive, to bear fruit, to give life, with a certain confidence, a certain faith in the future. If she harboured fears about the child's future, physically as well as morally, why would she run that risk?

That is why the serpent, the ferment of desire, goes after her first: it overcomes the resistance of the one who embodies faithfulness, faith. And it is she who will persuade her husband. After the sin, the man who embraced the whole universe finds himself diminished.

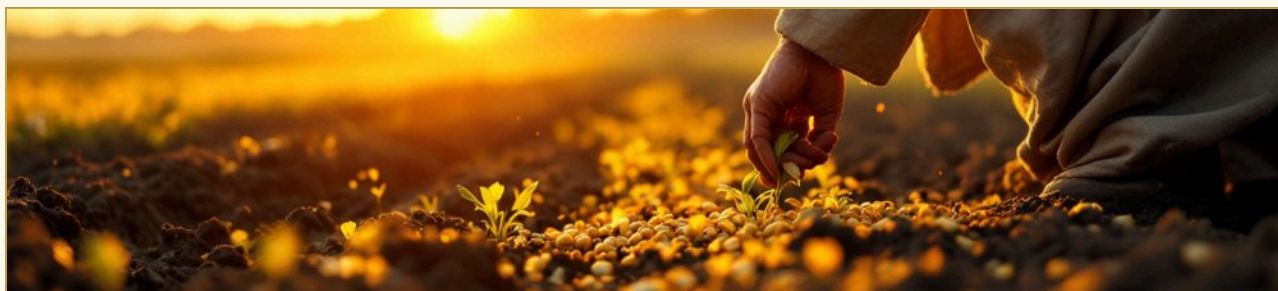
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

She is the one who agrees to receive, to bear fruit, to give life, with a certain confidence in the future, a certain faith in the future.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Bringing a child into the world and raising him means giving credit to the future. What trust did our parents place in us? And what fear sometimes keeps us from doing the same?

One Does Not Sow in Thin Air



PRESENTATION

At the beginning of Avram's story there is not yet any question of Torah: the question is of descendants, of seed — and of land. The Rav explains why this restored faith needs soil.

THE QUESTION

Why does Avram's faith need a land — and what does it mean that he “recovered man after two thousand years”?

THE ANSWER

“The greatest man among the giants” (Yehoshua 14:15), which our Sages apply to Avraham.

The damaged faith is rediscovered through Avram, and he passes it on to his descendants. Along this path, dialogue between the Creator and the creature becomes possible again; and when dialogue is restored, there is the possibility of growth. But the world is the place where man flourishes: without it, no flourishing. That is why the text speaks of zera, of sowing — but sowing in the earth. A land is needed at all costs to develop Avram's identity.

Avram is called the greatest of men because he recovered man after two thousand years: he restored the image of man. When one refers to Avram, there is no longer any need to declare that G-d is King of the world: His kingship passes through that of man. In the language he newly created with his Creator, man became His spokesman, and G-d found a refuge on earth.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

He recovered man after two thousand years; he restored the image of man.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

A seed needs soil; a faith needs a place to live. What is the “soil” where our faith grows best — home, synagogue, study, the Shabbat table? And which one are we neglecting?

Why Jewish History Begins in Exile



PRESENTATION

At Sinai, an entire people heard the word of G-d. And yet, before the golden calf, it said: “these are your gods, Israel”. The Rav starts from there to define idolatry — and exile.

THE QUESTION

What is idolatry, if a people that heard G-d can fall into it — and why is exile constructive?

THE ANSWER

“These are your gods, Israel” (Shemot 32:4).

Idolatry is the fragmentation of all the elements G-d created: failing to connect them, to unite them into a single force, and to bring them into play in one's own life. Today we think this, tomorrow that. The Rav does not put it on trial: a newborn child has not yet experienced life, has not yet been forged by trials.

That is why man's exile is not negative: it is constructive. The history of the Jewish people begins with an exile, because it was forbidden to turn in on itself, to remain confined within its borders, without dialogue with the outside world. We were born in exile; the Garden of Eden is no longer the starting point, it becomes the destination. We long for the land, for Yerushalayim, for the Sanctuary — and even if the project did not come to fruition, we remain driven by faith. That is complete faith: holding firm when everything outside cries out with questions.

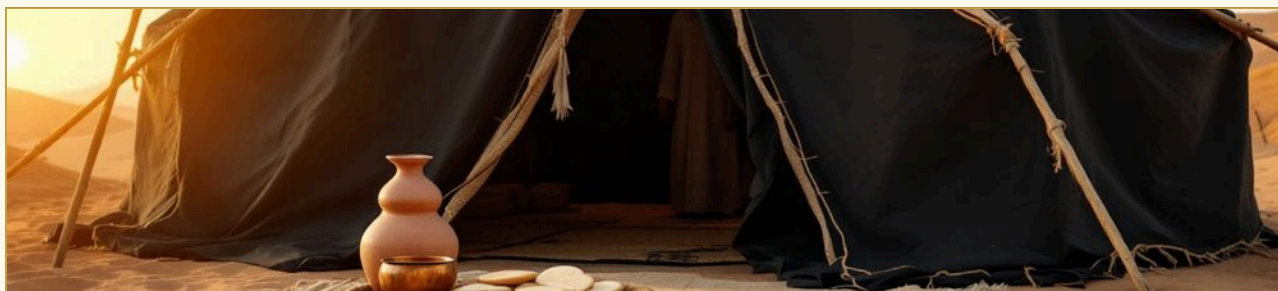
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

This exile of man is not negative; this exile of man is constructive.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Have our “exiles” — a move, a school, a job far from our own — only distanced us, or have they also built us? Let each person say what he learned far from home.

Shield of Avraham



PRESENTATION

G-d makes a covenant with Avram because he shared His faith with Him — his faith in chessed, kindness. But the Rav also knows that kindness, badly practised, can wound.

THE QUESTION

Why does the blessing close on Avraham alone — and how can one do good without humiliating the one who receives it?

THE ANSWER

“Blessed are You, L-rd, Shield of Avraham” (first blessing of the Amidah).

Among all the patriarchs, the blessing closes on Avraham alone: he is the bearer of chessed. G-d has it said of Himself that He is known by His deeds: no need to philosophise about His existence; ask yourselves about His attributes — and each of them has kindness as its source. But chessed badly practised arouses envy, contempt, sometimes hatred; people do not want to be beholden to anyone. Our Sages teach that the poor man does the rich man more of a service than the rich man does the poor; even so, between a giver and a receiver there is always the risk of jealousy and the shame of dependence.

Hence another definition of kindness: each day I seek to reach a higher level, and when I grow, I no longer serve only my own person; many benefit from what I become. I have integrated others into myself. There is no longer me and the other: there is the other who finds himself in me. This is the principle of unity — that of G-d, who created His world and who is One: the whole world finds itself in Him.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

There is not me and the other; there is the other who finds himself in me, who recognises himself in me.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Does our help leave others beholden, or does it make them grow with us? Let each person think of someone who made him grow simply by growing himself.

“For My Sake the World Was Created”



PRESENTATION

Our Sages teach that each person must say: for my sake the world was created. The Rav explains that this is not a statement of pride, but a statement of unity.

THE QUESTION

What does “the world was created for my sake” mean — and how does exile teach unity?

THE ANSWER

Our Sages: “each person must say: for my sake the world was created”.

The point is not to scatter oneself, nor to say: I exist, and the other exists only in relation to me. “For my sake the world was created” means that the whole universe is found in me; I can therefore turn it toward idolatry or toward the recognition of G-d. The attributes of the Divine are distributed among men — justice in one, mercy in another, truth in a third — but each man, through his attribute, represents the whole of creation.

An idolatrous notion has taken shape, which sees humanity as a multitude of separate individuals, completing one another by mere mutual contribution. That is not how the world should be seen. Exile serves to combat this separation of currents, cultures and forces, and to make them converge. The kingdoms that will expose the Jewish people to exile — Egypt is their matrix — help to form the people that must teach the universe the unity of G-d, the unity of the universe and the unity of the nations.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Each man, through his attribute, represents the whole of creation.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What attribute — justice, kindness, truth, patience — does each of us recognise in the person sitting next to him? Let each person tell him, and also name the one he would like to develop in himself.

Lending to G-d



PRESENTATION

“He counted it to him as tzedakah”: Rashi understands that it is counted to Avram’s merit. The Rav suggests also hearing tzedakah in its proper sense — giving others the benefit — and illuminates it with a verse from Proverbs.

THE QUESTION

How can one “lend to G-d” — and who is the poor man the verse speaks of?

THE ANSWER

“He who is gracious to the poor lends to the L-rd” (Mishlei 19:17); “the faithful have vanished” (Tehillim 12:2).

To give others the benefit, one must first develop one’s own attributes, come oneself to carry within this likeness to the attributes of G-d, since G-d manifests Himself only through them. The verse in Proverbs says that whoever is generous to the poor lends to the L-rd, and that the L-rd undertakes to repay him far beyond.

But who has been reduced to poverty? The Rav gives an unexpected reading: it is the Creator of the world, whom people have shut up in a place, in a temple, when He is the Creator of the whole universe. How can He be confined to a few corners of this world? And our Sages state that at the destruction of the Temple, the men of faith vanished — because faith had been struck in this permanent dialogue of man with G-d.

THE RAV’S CONCLUSION

The one reduced to poverty is the Creator of the world, whom people have shut up in a place.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Do we shut G-d up in certain places and certain moments — the synagogue, the festivals? Where could we “make room” for Him this week, outside those places?