

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

LECH LECHA

11 Questions for the Shabbat Table

Eleven questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture "Lech Lecha: Lot, Our Neighbor": a nephew who resembles Avram down to his features, a shepherds' quarrel over a land promised but not conquered, and two symmetrical threats, Egypt that melts everything together and Sodom that shares nothing. Up to this sentence, spoken in order to part: we are brothers.



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

Haran and the Furnace



PRESENTATION

Lot's story begins with the death of his father. Haran had told himself: if Avram comes out of the blazing furnace unharmed, I will believe there is a providence, and I will follow his path. Avram came out. Haran threw himself in after him, and perished.

THE QUESTION

What should we remember of Haran, who died for wanting to follow his brother's faith?

THE ANSWER

“Haran died in the lifetime of Terach his father, in the land of his birth, in Ur Kasdim” (Bereshit 11:28).

We do not always have the same resources in a spiritual life, says the Rav. Not everything is alike, and the miracle that occurs for one will not necessarily be granted to another. Haran wanted to build on someone else's success; he went through the same trial without having the same strength.

Yet we will remember of him that he wanted to set himself as an example of faith in the G-d of Avraham. And at the end of this road the Mashiach of Israel will appear, since David will descend from Lot, the son of Haran.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The miracle that may occur for one will not necessarily be granted to another.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

It is tempting to throw oneself into a trial because someone else succeeded at it. Have we ever wanted to do “like” someone, without having the strength for it? What did we learn from that failure?

One Does Not Imitate the Patriarchs



PRESENTATION

Lot followed Avram; he resembles him down to his features, and he considers himself his true spiritual heir. For the Rav, this is precisely what poisons the beginning of Avram's journey.

THE QUESTION

Why can imitating a master become a danger — and should we imitate the patriarchs?

THE ANSWER

“Avram went up from Egypt [...] and Lot with him” (Bereshit 13:1); “a mixed multitude also went up with them” (Shemot 12:38).

Each person, in his spiritual life, develops in his own way. One is guided by a master, but one does not imitate the patriarchs. Conforming to the laws of the Torah, yes; seeking to relive their trials, no: we are not going to marry two sisters like Yaakov, go down to Egypt because there is a famine, or bring about a sacrifice supposedly for G-d. Spiritual life is collective in the practice of the mitzvot; in the way one grows, each has his own pace and sensitivity.

The text says that Avram “goes up” from Egypt. The Jewish people, for its part, came out of it; those who went up from it were the mixed multitude that had joined the children of Israel, and that would instigate the sin of the golden calf. The phenomenon is already visible here: Avram goes up, and he brings Lot up with him.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Through their lives, the patriarchs simply suggested to us what we are called to face in our stages of growth.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Admiring is not copying. Whom do we admire so much that we want to resemble him in everything? Let each person say what he would like to take from that person — and what in himself must keep its own pace.

Many Facets, One Framework



PRESENTATION

Regarding Lot, who wants to be Avram's heir, the Rav lays down a general rule: what defines Judaism, and what takes someone outside its framework?

THE QUESTION

Is there only one way of being Jewish — and can one leave the Jewish people by not observing a mitzvah?

THE ANSWER

“Your covenant, which You sealed in our flesh” (Grace after Meals).

There is no single definition of Judaism: there is a Chassidic stream, a Lithuanian stream, a traditionalist stream, and each applies its spiritual path in its own way. But there are limits: the framework of the six hundred and thirteen commandments.

Yet someone who does not practise one of these laws is not thereby outside the framework of the Jewish people. The Rav gives an example: an uncircumcised Jew is virtually considered circumcised. Someone who has vowed to derive no benefit from the “uncircumcised” may benefit from a service rendered by an uncircumcised Jew, for the word does not designate him. This Jew falls short in practising the mitzvah, but the sign of the covenant is already engraved in his flesh.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Someone who does not practise one law among the 613 mitzvot is not thereby outside the framework of the Jewish people.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In our family, each person lives his Judaism in his own way. Do we know how to recognise the belonging of someone who practises less than we do? Let each person say what, in his eyes, binds us all together despite our differences.

The Shepherds' Quarrel



PRESENTATION

On the way up from Egypt, Lot has made his fortune. He thinks he can become independent and no longer rely on Avram. The conflict breaks out between their shepherds, and the text adds: “the Canaanite and the Perizzite then dwelt in the land”.

THE QUESTION

What are Avram's shepherds and Lot's really quarrelling about?

THE ANSWER

“There was a quarrel between the herdsmen of Avram's cattle and the herdsmen of Lot's cattle; the Canaanite and the Perizzite then dwelt in the land” (Bereshit 13:7).

Lot clings to a single guiding line of his master: the practice of justice. The Rav does not treat it lightly — being rigorous in how one lives one's Judaism, toward G-d as toward society, is no small matter. But a line taken on its own ceases to be a path. And it is no accident that the conflict breaks out at the level of the shepherds: these shepherds are each side's disciples.

The land is promised, but it is not conquered: may one send one's flock to graze in the neighbouring fields? Lot reasons that the land is promised to Avram's descendants, that Avram has no descendants, that he is therefore the heir and the land falls to him — a line of reasoning, notes the Rav, still seen in our own day. Avram holds, on the contrary, that as long as ownership is not definitively established, one must go on living on good terms with the neighbours.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

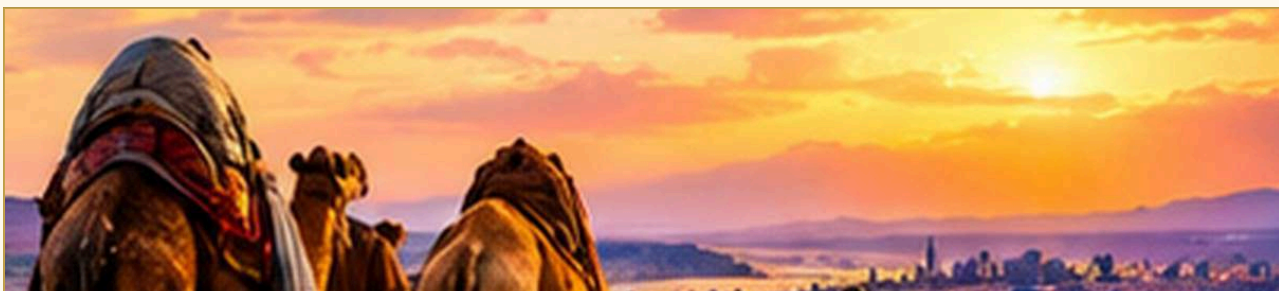
As long as the land is not conquered and ownership is not definitively established, one must go on living on good terms with the neighbours.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Our “shepherds' quarrels” — seats, objects, screen time — sometimes hide a bigger question. Which one is hiding behind our last quarrel? And how do we live on good terms with a neighbour before everything is settled?

SUBJECT 05

A Land Where Others Can Live



PRESENTATION

Avram does not arrive in Canaan alone: he brings up with him Lot, and “the souls they had made in Haran”, those he had won over to his cause. The Rav reads in this a project of shared life.

THE QUESTION

Why does Avram want to involve others besides his descendants in life on the land — and what distinguishes a “great nation” from a holy nation?

THE ANSWER

“The souls they had made in Haran” (Bereshit 12:5); “They will take hold of the corner of a Jew’s garment, saying: we will go with you” (Zechariah 8:23).

The Jewish people is not here to live alone, separated from the nations. Ownership remains that of the children of Avraham and the descendants of Yitzchak, but this does not prevent other peoples from living there, for we cannot conceive of our existence without the other peoples. It is promised that at the end of days a man of the nations will take hold of a Jew’s garment and say: take me with you, for I know that G-d is with you. This does not mean that he will practise the whole Torah, nor that he will claim a share of the land.

For “great nation” is not enough: it was promised to Yishmael too. Being great is a matter of standing, not necessarily of numbers. What distinguishes is holiness: a holy people, a holy time, a holy land. The land of Israel remains the spiritual laboratory of the Jewish people, a dimension of life that joins the whole universe to a single purpose.

THE RAV’S CONCLUSION

We cannot conceive of our existence without the other peoples.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Whom have we “brought along with us” this year — someone whose outlook we changed? And what place do we make in our home for those who are not family?

Two Egypts



PRESENTATION

Each person is obliged to see himself as if he himself had come out of Egypt. The Rav points out that the Hebrew name of Egypt, Mitzrayim, is a dual: one does not come out of just one Egypt.

THE QUESTION

What are the two “Egypts” that threaten Avram — and why can neither of them hold?

THE ANSWER

“In every generation, each person must see himself as if he himself had come out of Egypt” (Pesach Haggadah).

The first Egypt wants to melt the individual into the mass. It holds other peoples under its sway, grants them autonomy, but they remain colonised: everyone must think like everyone else and eat like everyone else. It is not for nothing that Egypt drowned: this annihilation of the self for the sake of the whole leads to the destruction of everything. Its rule is generalised exchange: what is mine is yours, what is yours is mine.

The second is Sodom, which posits the reverse: strictness, pure justice, each keeps what he has. Neither holds: one cannot live by pure justice, nor by an Egypt where everything melts together, until Yosef nationalises all the land for Pharaoh's benefit. The middle way must be found: each keeps what he has, because he worked to obtain it, without strictness becoming a system.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The middle way between the two must be found.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In our home, do we lean more toward “everything belongs to everyone” or toward “to each his own”? Where would a little more sharing be needed, and where a little more respect for what belongs to each person?

When Charity Becomes a Sin



PRESENTATION

For Sodom, not everyone is born with the same chances or the same abilities — and it is the Creator who willed it so. The Rav follows this logic to the end, and shows where it leads.

THE QUESTION

How does Sodom come to condemn charity — and what remains true in its criticism?

THE ANSWER

“Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed mikedem” (Bereshit 13:11).

If the Creator willed that this man be poor, why should I oppose it? Doing charity, in this logic, means going against the One who decided his lot. Yet the Rav relates that when asked what the unbeliever resembles in the realm of impurity, a master answered: one who performs an act of charity — because he does it in a spirit of domination and manipulation of the other. A paternalistic spirit, of whatever kind, diverts the law from its course.

There is a legitimate pride in making one's own way: a child is made to become independent one day, and so is a disciple. But total strictness allows neither growth, nor renewal, nor knowledge. And Lot moves away mikedem: not only toward the east, but away from the Ancient One of the world, He who judged that the world could not stand on justice alone and that kindness had to be joined to it.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

A paternalistic spirit, of whatever kind, is a way of diverting the law from its course.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

When we help someone, do we help him grow or depend on us? Let each person think of help he received that made him freer — and of another that left him indebted.

Why Pray for Avimelech and Not for Pharaoh?



PRESENTATION

Two kings take Sarah: Pharaoh, then, later, Avimelech, king of Gerar. The Rav notes a difference: Avraham does not pray for Pharaoh, but he does pray for Avimelech.

THE QUESTION

Why does Avraham pray for one and not for the other?

THE ANSWER

“The L-rd struck Pharaoh with great plagues” (Bereshit 12:17); “he will pray for you and you will live” (Bereshit 20:7).

When Pharaoh takes Sarah, he suffers the consequences of his act: plagues strike him, and no one tells him to ask Avram to pray for him. Avram does not intervene. The next day Pharaoh returns Sarah and sends her off with many gifts: this is what makes Avram wealthy, just as the children of Israel will later leave Egypt laden with goods, without anyone having prayed for the plague-stricken Egyptians.

With Avimelech, everything is different. G-d reveals Himself to him when he has not yet touched Sarah and is still wondering whether this brother-and-sister story is true; He asks him to have Avraham pray for him — and Avraham prays. Likewise, Avraham will not pray for Egypt, but he will pray for Sodom: for the justice of Sodom can be redeemed, provided it takes in the exchange and sharing that Egypt has. That will then be the messianic era.

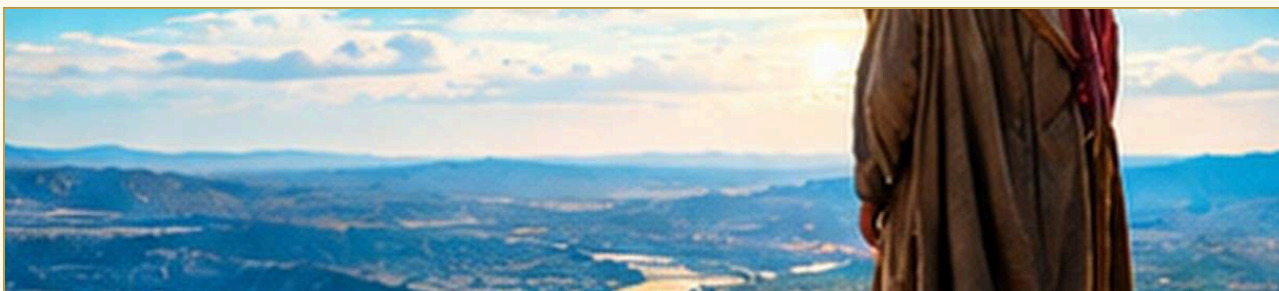
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Avraham does not pray for Egypt; he prays for Sodom.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Whom do we pray for? Only for those close to us, or also for those who have wronged us but can still change? Let each person name someone he could pray for this Shabbat.

“We Are Brothers”



PRESENTATION

The shepherds quarrel, and Avram says to Lot: let there be no strife between me and you, for we are brothers; part from me. This sentence is often quoted today — in the opposite sense.

THE QUESTION

Why is brotherhood used here as an argument for parting, when everywhere else it is invoked to unite?

THE ANSWER

“For we are brothers” (Bereshit 13:8).

It is Avram who asks for the separation, so that there is no confusion. The Rav notes that today this sentence appears in speeches between the various streams of the Jewish people as a call to come together; yet it was said for a separation. We share values, and this sharing makes us brothers; but that does not mean we must be identical, the same with the same. Each remains on his own path: if you consider that justice suits you, I keep that of chessed.

This chessed has left traces even among those who drifted away: the descendants of Yishmael, notes the Rav, are distinguished by the welcome they give their guests, the door always open — a practice of kindness inherited from Avraham, in which one steps aside before the other.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

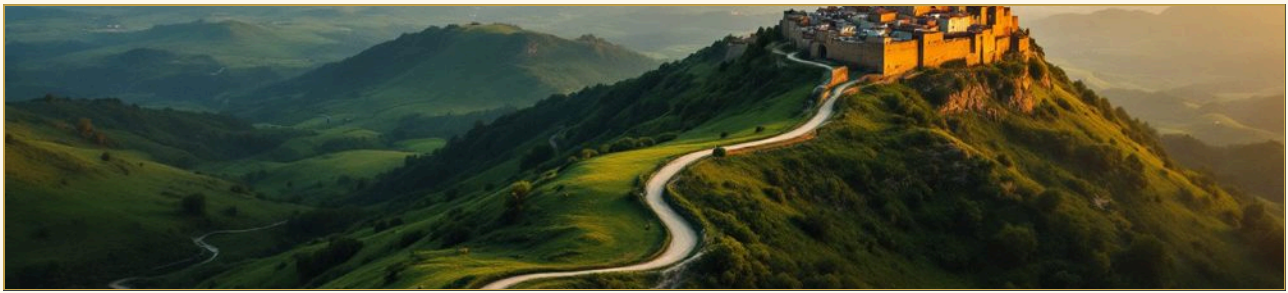
We share values, and sharing these values makes us brothers. But that does not mean we must be identical to one another.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We often confuse unity with resemblance. In our family, who does not resemble us and yet remains our brother? And from what would we sometimes need to step away — not out of a quarrel, but so that each keeps his own path?

SUBJECT 10

Two Messiahs



PRESENTATION

Egypt and Sodom, generosity and strictness: the Rav finds these two movements again on the horizon of history, in the two messianic figures that tradition announces.

THE QUESTION

What do Mashiach ben Yosef and Mashiach ben David represent — and why must neither be excluded?

THE ANSWER

Mashiach ben Yosef and Mashiach ben David.

The first, Mashiach ben Yosef, holds that everything should be placed under a single banner — no longer Pharaoh's, but that of the Creator of the universe, all currents of thought converging on the idea of a G-d who created the world and watches over it. But he will give way to Mashiach ben David, who sees to it that each keeps what characterises him, defines him, makes him an individual.

These two movements are found within Avraham's very heritage: on one side openness and homogeneity, the open doors so dear to Avraham; on the other strict observance, more conservative. Neither is to be excluded: it is their sum that makes up the messianism of the Jewish people. And each time we are only correcting the movements of generosity and the movements of strictness we have had: knowing how to strike the balance of things.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

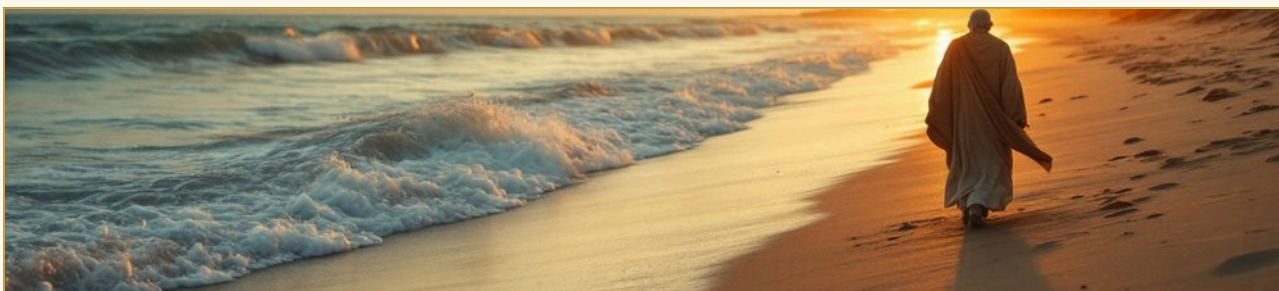
Neither one nor the other will be excluded: it is the sum of these two movements that makes up the messianism of the Jewish people.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In our family there is often a “ben Yosef” who wants to bring everyone together and a “ben David” who insists that each remain himself. Who plays which role in our home? And how can we make them work together?

SUBJECT 11

Like the Dust of the Earth



PRESENTATION

Once Lot has gone, G-d renews the promise: lift up your eyes, all this land I give to your descendants forever, and your descendants will be like the dust of the earth. The Rav reads this promise in the light of the separation.

THE QUESTION

What does the separation from Lot change for the land — and why compare Avram's descendants to dust?

THE ANSWER

“I will make your descendants like the dust of the earth” (Bereshit 13:16); “you are the fewest of all peoples” (Devarim 7:7).

The Perizzite is the one who declares the land open, without borders, belonging to everyone; the Canaanite is the one who claims it for himself alone. Now the land of Israel is indeed a land without borders, but it belongs exclusively to Israel. That is why G-d declares once again that He will give it to Avram's descendants forever.

The dust of the earth is what stops the movement of the waves and keeps the land from being drowned. Likewise, if the L-rd chose the smallest of peoples, our Sages understand: the one that knows how to make itself small before others. One cannot stand still on shifting sands: one must walk this land, through its length and breadth. And Avram goes to settle in Hevron, where he builds an altar.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Hevron is the junction where the spiritual and the material meet.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Making oneself small is not disappearing. In what recent situation did our humility, like dust, hold back a wave that threatened to sweep everything away? Let each person give an example.