

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

NOACH

11 Questions for the Shabbat Table

Eleven questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture “Noah — Discovering Elokim”: is Noah the spiritual man par excellence, or only a stage between Adam and Avraham? Three readings of one verse, the ark set against the milah, the three sons as three layers of being — and a finding: Noah knew G-d through the attribute of justice, not yet through that of kindness.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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Themes for reflection and questions to share around the table of Parashat Noach

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SUBJECT 01

The man everyone likes



PRESENTATION

Noah, our sages say, is at peace with heaven and at peace with people. He finds his place among the great, adapts his language to the humblest, is very much at ease in this world. An exceptional man, open to all, who fights no battle.

THE QUESTION

Is the one everyone appreciates the spiritual man par excellence?

THE ANSWER

“And Noah found grace in the eyes of the L-rd” (Bereshit 6:8).

Noah is a man of openness, apparently open to everyone, who tries to live with those around him at every level. He lets nothing show. He fights no battle; he does not want to.

It is one way of leading one's spiritual life: considering that it concerns only one's own person and nothing else. He takes part in every activity as if nothing were the matter; he carries his values everywhere, but keeps them to himself.

So is he truly the spiritual man par excellence? To answer, the Rav will distinguish three types of men the Torah presents: Adam, Noah and Avraham.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

I carry my values with me; they are for me alone.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Where do we keep our values “to ourselves” so as not to disturb anyone? Is there a battle we ought to fight, even at the cost of being a little less liked?

Three men, one and the same verse



PRESENTATION

There is a three-word verse recited at bedtime: “For Your salvation I hope, O L-rd”. Depending on the order in which its words are placed, it says three different things — and these three readings are three men: Adam, Noah and Avraham.

THE QUESTION

Three ways of awaiting G-d's help: where does each of us stand in this verse?

THE ANSWER

“Lishuatcha kiviti Hashem” (Bereshit 49:18) and its three readings.

The first reading is Adam's. We set out on paths that are beyond us; we have neither the strength nor the courage to face the world's difficulties, so we use G-d as a crutch, and spend our time imploring Him. Adam was to keep what he had gained in the garden; he listened to that serpent's voice speaking through him, he wanted mastery of the world while staying in the garden, and he failed.

The second is Noah's. He does not want to remain dependent on divine assistance, sets himself challenges and partly succeeds: he keeps a relative balance between G-d's demands and those of life here below, and G-d makes a covenant with him. But he resists the current only by withdrawing; that is the ark.

The third is Avraham's: O L-rd, it is Your salvation I hope for — I seek to free You from the clutches of this world, to have You recognized within it. He does not withdraw; he wants to share his experience with his whole generation, and to appeal no longer to justice, but to kindness. These are the three ages of a spiritual life, from youth to maturity.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

These are not three different paths; they are three ways in, three steps.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each one here will recognize himself in one of the three readings. Let each say which, without flattering himself. And what, this year, would be the next step — the one he has not yet dared to climb?

SUBJECT 03

Prayer, the field, the mountain



PRESENTATION

The three steps of Adam, Noah and Avraham will be lived in turn by the patriarchs, each in his own way. Our sages associate an image with each: the mountain for Avraham, the field for Yitzchak. The Rav reads in them three ways of standing firm.

THE QUESTION

How did Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov each live the development of a spiritual life?

THE ANSWER

Our sages: Avraham is called “mountain”, Yitzchak “field”.

Yaakov is the ish tam, the man of integrity, the one who has internalized all values: he is the man of prayer. His spiritual quest is borne out in the middot, the virtues of man.

Yitzchak is the man of gevurah, and he is associated with the field. A field is exposed to every kind of weather, to sometimes rocky ground: one must hold firm and not be swept away by the current. Yitzchak practises a withdrawal compared with his father.

Avraham is the mountain. The Torah tells us of no virtue that would predispose him to his calling: everything plays out through constant trials. His life is nothing but trial, but he decided to face it independently of any divine assistance, engaged in an open dialogue with G-d for the good of humanity.

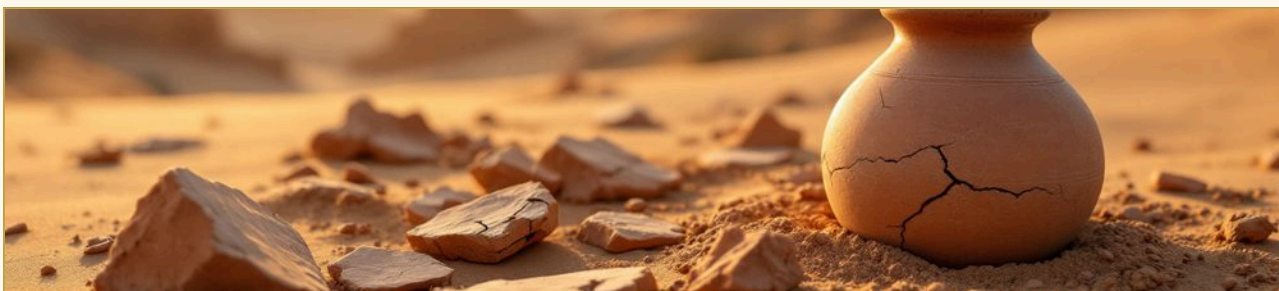
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The man of prayer is Yaakov; the man of the land is Yitzchak; the one who meets every challenge is Avraham.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Are we more in prayer, in the field or on the mountain? Let each say which trial made him grow.

A story others also tell



PRESENTATION

Other cultures, other civilizations tell of a flood. The laws of Sumer, say critical minds, reflect older laws that the law of Moshe supposedly took over. The Rav does not shy away from this objection.

THE QUESTION

If other peoples tell of a flood, what gives the Torah's account its value?

THE ANSWER

“The earth had become corrupt before Elokim” (Bereshit 6:11).

For the Rav, it is not the precedence of an account that gives it its value: it is not so much the story, nor the object, nor the material, but the teaching that emerges from it. If creation is ex nihilo, it has its source in a law: no creation has taken place that was not preceded by a spirit, and it is that spirit that gave birth to it.

From there, the flood can be read as an avalanche of laws and ideologies over which people fight, and which fosters corruption: a liberalism of thought that sits alongside violence and justifies it.

The one who withdraws into the tevah, into the ark, is the one who seeks refuge from this flood of ideas, of philosophical currents that threaten the world from every side.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

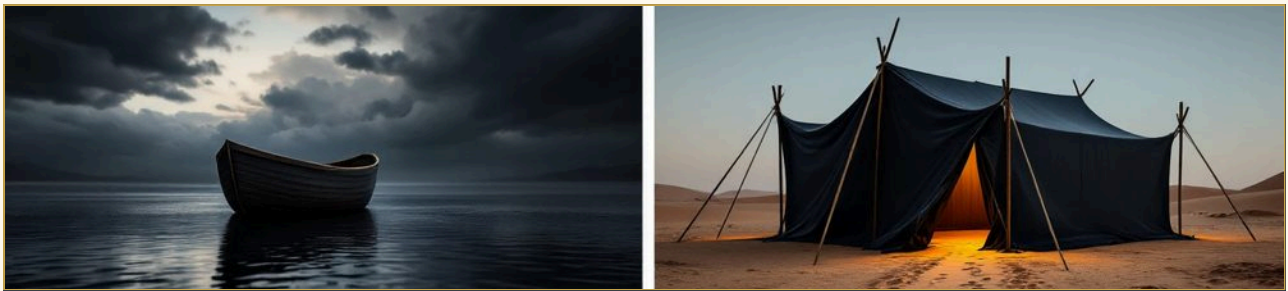
What matters in all things is the spirit that drives them.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What “flood of ideas” overwhelms us today — screens, opinions, fashions? And where do we find our ark?

SUBJECT 05

Tevah or milah



PRESENTATION

Noah's shelter is called tevah, the ark; but tevah also means “the word”. With Avraham, the sign of the covenant will be called milah, circumcision; and milah also means “speech”. Two words for word, and two attitudes.

THE QUESTION

What separates a word in which one takes refuge from speech that one addresses to another?

THE ANSWER

“Make yourself an ark” (Bereshit 6:14); the covenant of milah with Avraham (Bereshit 17).

The tevah is the bayit, the house: a withdrawal into oneself. Milah, on the contrary, is an opening outward, the opening of a dialogue. With Noah there is no dialogue; with Avraham there is.

Noah wanted to shut himself up in the text, in the word, to preserve his life against all those who disputed his spiritual calling. That is also why the generations of Noah are Noah himself: he could not communicate beyond himself.

Dialogue with G-d and dialogue with people open or close together.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

When one cannot open a dialogue with the Creator, one cannot share it with one's generation either.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Our study, our practice: is it an ark in which we protect ourselves, or speech we share? To whom could we pass on this week what we have learned?

Seven laws, and the measure of the middot



PRESENTATION

Noah, despite his withdrawal, received a revelation: the seven Noahide laws. But this revelation cost the life of an entire population. And the Rav comes to a question he often asks: by what is a spiritual life measured?

THE QUESTION

What gives the true measure of a spirituality: piety, knowledge, or something else?

THE ANSWER

The seven Noahide laws; “a land of wheat and barley, of vines, figs and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey” (Devarim 8:8).

The seven Noahide laws are the three cardinal sins — forbidden unions, idolatry, murder — then the prohibition of eating a limb taken from a living animal, the prohibition of theft, the establishment of a court that legislates, and finally the prohibition of blasphemy. This revelation cost the life of an entire population, concentrated at the time in the Middle East.

The Land of Israel matters only through the embryo it forms in relation to the whole globe. It is distinguished by its seven fruits, and these seven fruits are all symbolic: they represent the seven middot, the seven qualities.

For what matters most in a spiritual quest is the way it is expressed in our movements, our thoughts, our speech. It is the middot that give the measure of each person's spirituality.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is not piety, it is not knowledge, but the middot.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Looking only at our gestures and words today, how could one tell the quality of our spiritual life? Which middah would we like to work on this week?

SUBJECT 07

A little of Moshe, Yosef and Yaakov



PRESENTATION

The verse gives Noah three titles: ish, tsaddik, tamim. The Rav notes that each of these titles is elsewhere that of someone else: Moshe is called ish, Yosef tsaddik, Yaakov tam. Noah would thus carry a portion of each of them.

THE QUESTION

What does Noah share with Moshe, Yosef and Yaakov — and what does that say about him?

THE ANSWER

“Noah was a righteous man, whole” (Bereshit 6:9); “Moshe, ish haElokim” (Devarim 33:1); “Yaakov, a whole man” (Bereshit 25:27).

Ish is a man of high moral standing, an important man: that is Moshe. Tsaddik, righteous, is Yosef. Tamim, whole, is Yaakov. Noah has a portion of each.

The link with Yosef is not accidental, says the Rav: both were disputed by their own people. And Noah is ish like Moshe because he is, like him, the recipient of revelation. Yet a spiritual quest pushed to the extreme, when one cannot measure up to it, takes away life: the revelation at Sinai itself was accompanied by death, and the people survived it only because they had managed to silence, for the occasion, everything that divides.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Yosef is disputed by his brothers, and Noah is disputed by his generation.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

By whom have we been challenged for staying faithful to our values? And what portion of a great model would each of us like to carry?

Elokim, and not yet Hashem



PRESENTATION

Noah “walked with Elokim”. Now Elokim is the Name of justice, of strictness. The Rav points out that from the very next chapter, another Name appears. Between the two lies the whole question of the ways of grasping G-d.

THE QUESTION

Why did Noah remain at the level of Elokim, and what does the appearance of the other Name change?

THE ANSWER

“Noah walked with Elokim” (Bereshit 6:9); “The L-rd smelled the pleasing aroma... I will no longer curse the ground because of man” (Bereshit 8:21).

Just as there are seventy ways of interpreting the Torah, there are seventy ways of grasping G-d's presence and belief in Him. Each person has his own way of living his spiritual life. Hebrew calls these modes of perception *sarim*, princes: they are only secondary perceptions, and stopping at them places us a few steps from idolatry. But there is a level beyond these seventy degrees: the one that manages to unify all these branches into a single reality that transcends them all.

Noah perceived something of this, but he perceived G-d from the angle of justice.

Immediately afterward the other Name appears: when the laws are revealed to Noah, and the L-rd commits Himself to bring no more flood — no longer to make the same demands of humanity. He accepts that these Names be used, as can be seen today in the different streams of Judaism.

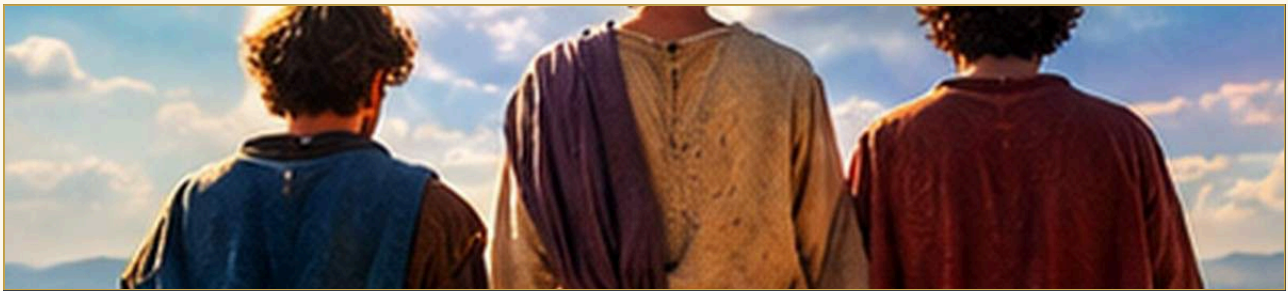
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Elokim is an attribute of justice; it is not an attribute of kindness.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Do we see G-d first as the One who judges, or as the One who gives? And can we respect a way of living Judaism other than our own?

Three sons, three layers of being



PRESENTATION

Noah begets Shem, Ham and Yefet. The text could have simply listed them; it places the small word *et* before each name, as if to separate them from one another. Adam had had three sons, and so had Shet.

THE QUESTION

Why does the Torah insist on distinguishing these three sons — and what becomes of them when taken separately?

THE ANSWER

“Noah begot three sons: *et* Shem, *et* Ham and *et* Yefet” (Bereshit 6:10).

These three sons are the three stages of every being, lived simultaneously. The *nefesh* is biological existence, each person's impulses. The *ruach* is the spirit, conception, ideological forms. And in the word *neshamah* there is *shem*, the name, the identity of the essence that dwells in every creature. *Yefet* is art, beauty, elegance of thought, indispensable even to the demands of spiritual life — one need only think of the majesty that emanated from the High Priest's service in the Sanctuary.

If the text places *et* before each name, it is because it insists on distinguishing each child as a different page of life. *Shem* and *Yefet* are two noble virtues, energized by *Ham*, by the impulses. What makes them unhealthy is being taken in isolation, autonomously and independently.

Then the earth becomes corrupt — even through those spiritual people who scorn the side of *Yefet*, or who spend their time decrying *Ham*: they will be caught out at some turn of events. The same goes for devotees of aesthetics alone: beautiful services, beautiful prayers, beautiful choirs, but the fervour is not there.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Shem, Ham and Yefet, when they are not separated, are all Noah.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each of us has a preference — the body, beauty, the spirit — and distrusts the other two. Which of these three parts have we neglected at home, and which do we scorn in others?

SUBJECT 10

The violence that robs man



PRESENTATION

The generation of the flood is accused of every evil: idolatry, debauchery, bloodshed. But that is not what the verse denounces when the decree falls. It says: the earth was filled with chamas, with violence.

THE QUESTION

Why does the decree fall not on the three cardinal sins, but on violence — and what violence made repair impossible?

THE ANSWER

“The earth had become corrupt before Elokim, and the earth was filled with violence... for all flesh had corrupted its way on the earth” (Bereshit 6:11-12).

Chamas means having robbed the authentic spiritual line of what belongs to it: it was deprived of its beauty, or of its impulse, or of its true essence. Man was dismembered. And from then on, people no longer recognize themselves in one another: there is no longer any possibility of recovery.

The verse says: all flesh had corrupted its way. This is said of Shem, Ham and Yefet, who failed to coordinate the movement of these three streams within a single spiritual perception of G-d. And the text then stops calling man Adam: he is now only basar, a being of flesh like all creatures.

For each began to fight over G-d, to steal Him, to hold Him captive in his own way. That is why G-d asks that Noah be the starting point of a new humanity.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

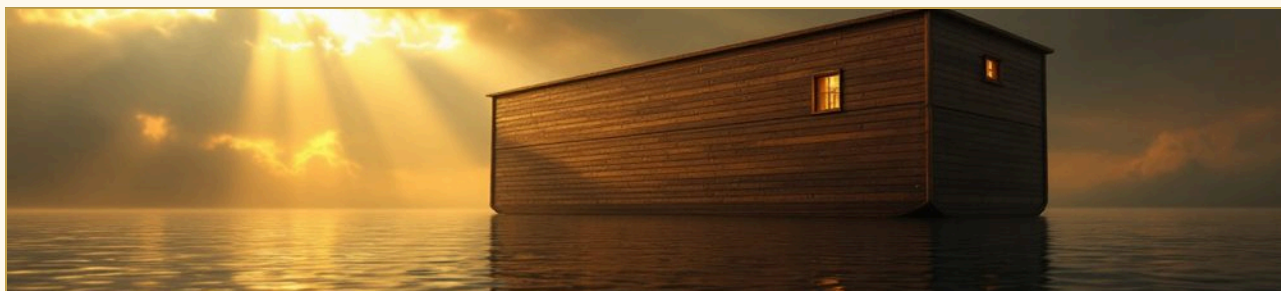
There is no longer any possibility of redemption.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We do violence to people by reducing them to just one of their parts: the worker, the joker, the pious one. Whom close to us have we shrunk in this way? And who has shrunk us, without our daring to say so?

SUBJECT 11

An ark built on the letters of the Name



PRESENTATION

The Torah gives the exact dimensions of the ark: three hundred cubits long, fifty wide, thirty high. And it says that at the end of forty days, Noah opened the window of the ark — whereas the flood lasted much longer.

THE QUESTION

What do these numbers contain, and why is time in the ark not counted like time outside?

THE ANSWER

“Three hundred cubits the length, fifty cubits the width, thirty cubits the height” (Bereshit 6:15); “Length of days is in her right hand” (Mishlei 3:16).

The measurements of the tevah are derived from the letters of the Name multiplied together. Hei is five and vav six: five times six, thirty, the height. Yud is ten: ten times five, fifty, the width. Yud times hei times vav: three hundred, the length. The tevah is the container in which Noah takes refuge: he takes refuge in the Name.

There were forty days of rain, then a hundred and fifty days of flooding, and Noah came out only seven or eight months later. But the time one spends in the tevah, in the Name, bears no relation to the time one lives outside. These forty days are the equivalent of the forty days of the giving of the Torah at Sinai.

Time outside belongs to the nature of things, not to spiritual life. Sometimes an hour of spirituality a day is enough to cover twenty-four hours, and a day to cover a whole life.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

There is length of life for those who hold to her right hand.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Which hour of our week “counts” more than the others? Where do we find that time which is not measured like the time outside?