

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

NOACH

11 Questions for the Shabbat Table

Eleven questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Noah — The Loosening of Morals”: the law of the strongest, the
search for idols to look up to, then the “anything goes” that leads
to the flood. At the heart of the lecture, one word, chen, grace —
and an unexpected answer: what G-d sees through Noah is
already Avraham.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

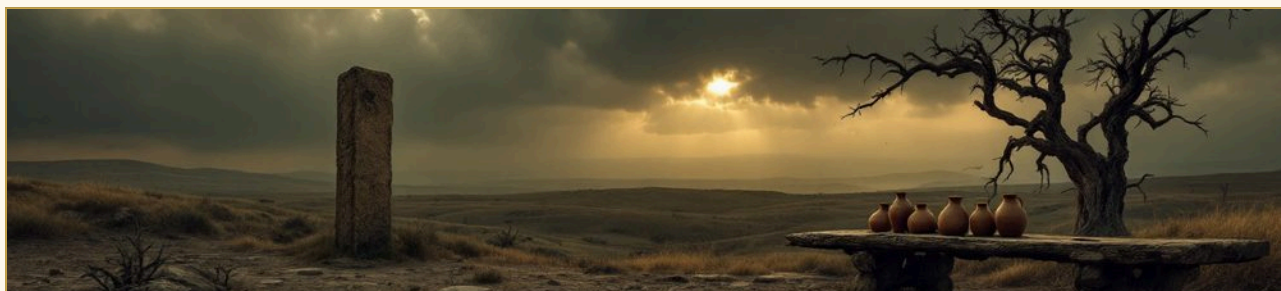
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Themes for reflection and questions to share around the table of Parashat Noach

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SUBJECT 01

Three scourges before the flood



PRESENTATION

The last verse of Bereshit says that Noah found grace in the eyes of the L-rd. For the Rav, this verse concludes a three-stage development in humanity's first steps. And we still know these three stages.

THE QUESTION

What are the three scourges that led to the flood, and why have we not left them behind?

THE ANSWER

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

History begins with the law of the strongest, with Kayin. It passes through the search for ideals, references, criteria, in the generation of Enosh. Then comes a third stage: the loosening of morals. These are scourges history has known, and that we still know.

G-d's original project was Adam: the name of every person whose development starts from the adamah, the earth — and just as the earth feeds him, he is fed by his spiritual aspirations. But man limited himself to ha-Adam: he left universality behind to shut himself into a perspective on life that belongs to him alone.

And that, already since Kayin. Since him, we have been dealing with the bnei ha-Adam.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

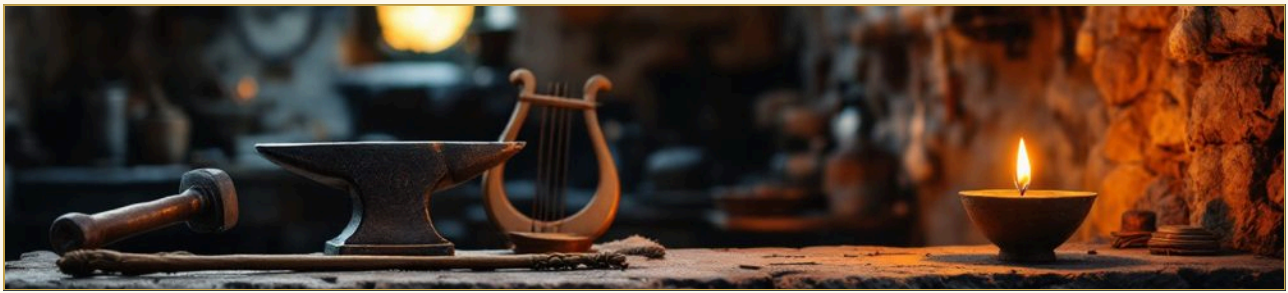
We have not managed to carry out this project of ben Adam.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Which of these three temptations — force, idols to look up to, “anything goes” — is most present around us? And what would take each of us from ha-Adam to ben Adam?

SUBJECT 02

Two lines, two civilizations



PRESENTATION

The Torah lists Kayin's descendants: Yaval, father of herdsmen, Yuval, father of musicians, Tuval-Kayin, the smith, and their sister Naamah. Facing them, the line of Shet and Enosh, in whose time “men began to call on the Name”. Two civilizations are about to meet.

THE QUESTION

What happens when the civilization of know-how marries the civilization of spiritual quest?

THE ANSWER

Bereshit 4:20-22 and 4:26; “Who is strong? One who masters his inclination” (Avot 4:1).

The bnei ha-Adam descended from Kayin develop a culture founded on commerce, music and the arts, technology and science; Naamah — who will be, says the Rav, Noah's wife — represents the civilization of leisure. Enosh's line, for its part, develops a quest for spirituality, attested by the names of its children, and this line culminates in Noah.

Our sages say that to be a prophet one needs wealth, wisdom and gevurah, strength, self-mastery. The pursuit of wealth is found among Kayin's children, the quest for wisdom among Shet's. In seeking to fuse the two streams together, in this loosening of morals, they produced mighty men.

But this strength was not the right one, and the union failed.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The truly strong man is the one who shows self-mastery.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In our home, do material success and spiritual quest speak to each other? And in what area would each of us like to be “strong” in our sages' sense?

The Name and desolation



PRESENTATION

From the generation of Enosh on, “men began to call on the Name”. One might see this as progress. The Rav sees in it the origin of the failure: they always remained at the level of the Name.

THE QUESTION

Can one serve G-d and yet serve an idol?

THE ANSWER

“Then men began to call on the Name of the L-rd” (Bereshit 4:26); “I will blot out man whom I have created” (Bereshit 6:7).

In the word shem, name, there is the notion of shemamah: desolation, wilderness, ruin. For each person perceives G-d in his own way, and when he addresses Him, he has already confined Him to his own category of thought, his requests, his needs. That tends rather to create deities: they are idols.

That is why G-d declares Himself disappointed with the development of this humanity and decides to blot out the man He created — to blot out ha-Adam, since there is no ben Adam: no man who fulfils himself on his own and draws all the forces of creation toward himself.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

One does not serve the absolute in the Name; one serves the derivatives of the Name.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

When we pray, do we ask G-d to be what we need? Let each look for a prayer, or a moment, that is not a request.

When the earthquake sweeps everything away



PRESENTATION

When G-d decides to destroy the rough draft, everyone goes: the righteous and the less righteous, children and adults. The question is harsh. The Rav does not dodge it, and shifts our gaze to what comes after.

THE QUESTION

If the upheaval sweeps everyone away, what decides the new course of history?

THE ANSWER

“These are the generations of Noah” (Bereshit 6:9).

When this earthquake strikes, it makes no distinction between deserving and undeserving people: it sweeps everything away, to make room for a new state of affairs in history.

The new current is determined by those who initiate a new direction of thought, and first of all by the righteous man of the generation. He opens a new path, and the generation cannot measure up to him or follow in his footsteps. As long as there is no new perspective, history marks time: people scrape by, they rest on what they have. But as soon as a righteous man gives history a new push, a new orientation is built on it.

That is what happens with Noah, what will happen with Avraham, with Moshe. These are the messianic moments we live through as the toldot unfold.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

What matters now is the new momentum that will be given to history.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In our family or community, are we resting on what we have, or giving a new push? Who around us opened a path that others ended up following?

A parashah that should have been called Toldot



PRESENTATION

The title of a parashah often comes from its first or second word. This one begins with “These are the toldot of Noah”. So it should have been called Toldot. Yet the first parashah bearing that name is that of Yitzchak, son of Avraham.

THE QUESTION

Why did Noah not “earn” a parashah called Toldot?

THE ANSWER

“These are the generations of Noah” (Bereshit 6:9); “These are the generations of Yitzchak, son of Avraham” (Bereshit 25:19).

There are, says the Rav, thirteen toldot in the Tanakh, thirteen lines of generations. The first is the story of the heavens and the earth; then come the two streams of the bnei ha-Adam: that of Kayin, and that of Shet, which will try to recover Adam, to be ben Adam. The one who will succeed is Avraham. That is why the first parashah called Toldot is that of Yitzchak, son of Avraham.

With Noah there are no toldot: Noah begets only his own person.

The fathers, by contrast, differ in their essence: Yitzchak has a different matrix from Avraham's. Avraham is chessed, Yitzchak will be gevurah, Yaakov will be emet — each a different stage of life.

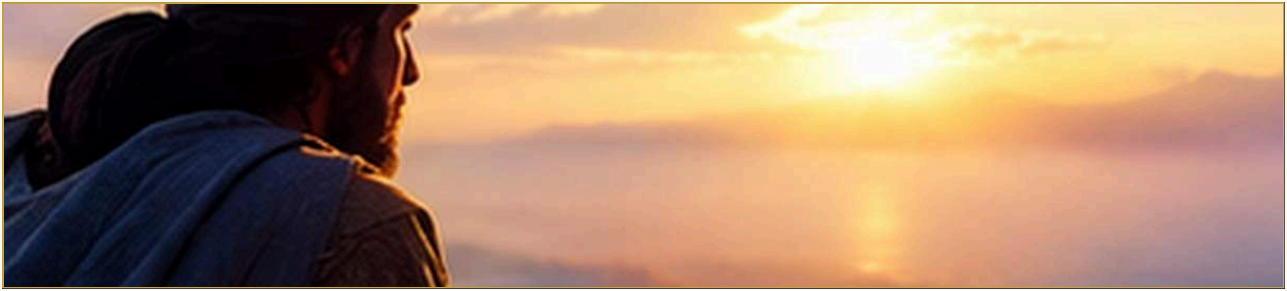
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Noah begets only his own person: that is to limit the march of history.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Are our children free to be something other than our copy? Let each say how he differs from his parents, and how that difference continues their story.

A grace that cannot be earned



PRESENTATION

The verse that decides humanity's fate fits into a few words: Noah found grace in the eyes of the L-rd. Nothing is said of his merits — they will come only afterward. And the word *chen*, grace, gave Hebrew the word meaning “free of charge”.

THE QUESTION

If grace is free, what does it consist of — and what is the difference between finding grace and inspiring grace?

THE ANSWER

“Grace is false and beauty is vain” (Mishlei 31:30); “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious” (Shemot 33:19).

It is not about the elegance of a gait, a word or a gesture: the verse warns that grace is false and beauty vain. The Rav keeps the definition of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch: an exceptional virtue given to man, which goes beyond his qualities and capacities. It is free — *chen* gave *chinam*, free — and G-d grants it to whom He wills, even to one who does not deserve it.

Some of our sages nevertheless say it is not entirely free: it is part of a will to rescue a situation. And one must distinguish between finding grace and inspiring grace. A likeable person wins you over: you see yourself in him, you adopt him easily. Esther was not beautiful to look at, and yet she inspired grace: that grace was in the eye of the one who beheld her.

The verse says Noah found grace “in the eyes”: it was by looking at him that G-d decided to endow him with this grace.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

This grace is far from objective.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Is there someone who “inspired grace” in us without being attractive at first glance? And do we look at others in a way that gives grace, or one that withholds it?

Three graces and a candelabrum



PRESENTATION

If grace is a gift, is there nonetheless a way to acquire it? The book of Proverbs points to two. The first comes down to one word: humility. And to explain it, the Rav tells a story of Rabbi Nachman.

THE QUESTION

Why is it to the humble that grace is given?

THE ANSWER

“To the humble He gives grace” (Mishlei 3:34).

The humble person is one who does not seek to impose his way of seeing, and who considers that in this varied world each person has within him a certain spice of grace. Our sages speak of three graces: the grace of a person, the charm of a place on those who live there, and the charm of an object one has chosen — a painting, a work of art — which does not necessarily have every quality, but which pleases me as it is.

Rabbi Nachman illustrated it. A son returns from a long exile saying he has learned the art of making a menorah, the art of lighting up the world. His father, who is a king, gathers all the artists and men of culture; the candelabrum is made before them, and no one embraces it.

The father is worried: so you do not have the secret of convincing everyone of your way of seeing? The son answers that this is proof he has succeeded in his mission: it was exactly what he wanted to show.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Each person has his own light, his own vision of things.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Let each name an object, a place or a person that charms him without being “perfect”. And when someone does not share our light, can we see theirs?

Encamping opposite the mountain



PRESENTATION

Before the giving of the Torah, it is said: “Israel encamped there, opposite the mountain”. Rashi comments: like one man, with one heart. In the verb vayichan, “he encamped”, the Rav hears the word chen, grace.

THE QUESTION

What made the unity of an entire people possible at Sinai?

THE ANSWER

“Israel encamped there, opposite the mountain” (Shemot 19:2); Rashi: like one man, with one heart.

Vayichan is not only translated “they encamped”. The word chen must be seen in it. Each one accepted that every person has a grace, and it was the communication between these different graces and charms that made G-d's revelation to the world possible.

The second way of acquiring grace is also indicated in Proverbs: “a loving doe, a graceful gazelle”, a title given to the Torah. It is the grace that lights up a face through the wisdom of the Torah.

But do only the humble and those who study have this grace? No, answers the Rav: it remains a mysterious gift, because through a person, a future is being projected.

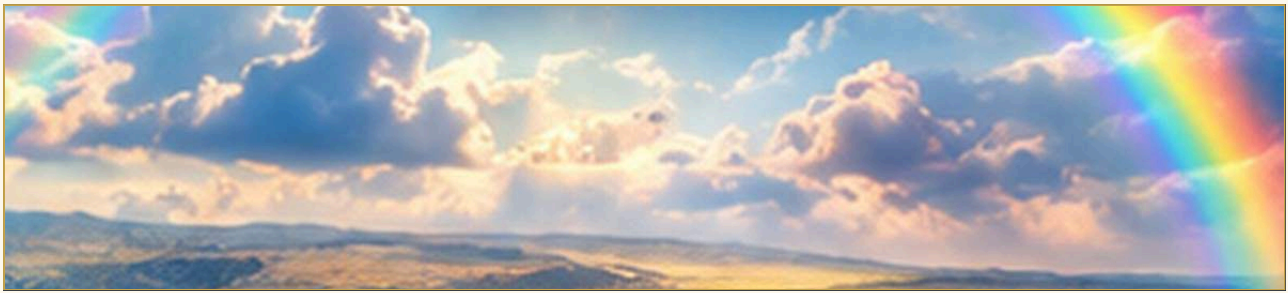
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Each one sought to find grace in the eyes of the other.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What would we need to keep quiet about at home to “encamp like one man” for the length of a Shabbat? And what grace do we recognize in the person we most often disagree with?

What if the flood had been a revelation?



PRESENTATION

The torrential rains drown the world. But the Torah itself is called rains of blessing, dew of life. And at Sinai, the revelation was so powerful that the people lost their breath, and dew was needed to revive them.

THE QUESTION

If the same water that gives life to a land can drown someone who cannot absorb it, what then was the flood?

THE ANSWER

Our sages: the Torah is called “rains of blessing”; the dew of life that revived Israel at Sinai.

Just as rain, by watering the soil, gives life to the land, the Torah is called rains of blessing and dew of life: it is meant to bring spiritual revival. But when one is unable to absorb these rains, when one stands like a rock, they pile up and one is drowned by the flood.

The flood was thus G-d's will to recover a humanity through a sudden revelation — but this humanity was not capable of it, and it disappeared; Noah alone gleaned from it only the Noahide law. At Sinai, the same manifestation deprived the people of life, and a dew restored their breath.

Why not in the time of the flood? Because that generation was divided, filled with violence and perversion. The generation of Sinai shared one and the same grace, like one man, with one heart; and it was this sharing that allowed the whole Torah to be absorbed by the Jewish people.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

When an extraordinary revelation exceeds the capacity to absorb it, the whole benefit of that revelation is lost.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We often think we must give more, more demands, more truth, all at once. On whom have we poured a rain he could not absorb? And what should we have given instead?

SUBJECT 10

He did not even try



PRESENTATION

Noah is ordered to take “pure” animals, seven of each kind, although no Torah had yet defined pure and impure. Rashi deduces that he saw far ahead. And yet our sages address a severe reproach to him.

THE QUESTION

What can be held against a man who is righteous, whole, and far-sighted?

THE ANSWER

“Of every pure animal you shall take seven pairs” (Bereshit 7:2); Rashi: those that will be pure for Israel.

Rashi indicates that these animals are destined to become pure: Noah had a more distant and more perceptive view of what true life with G-d must be. But for him, this life with G-d remains in the realm of the natural, of the life of this world, not a passage toward the beyond. He has a wisdom suited to the nature of this world, which goes no further.

He is a man skilled at interpreting events once they have happened, adapting them, finding their reference in the text; but he does not want to get ahead of events. He curled up within himself and lacked the confidence to tell himself that he might perhaps change the divine decree, enter into debate with the Creator and defend his generation.

Avraham did it for Sodom and Amorah, Moshe for the generation of the golden calf. Avraham did not succeed; Moshe succeeded and changed the decree. And a tsaddik who does not intervene for his generation does not deserve to be called a tsaddik.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

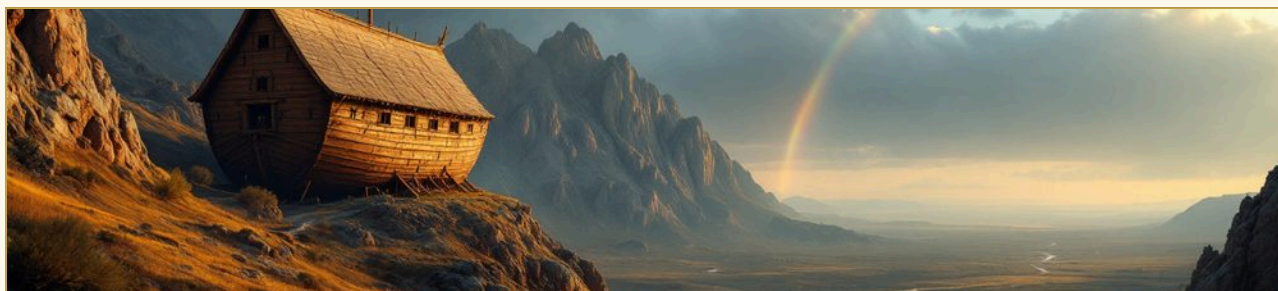
Noah did not even try.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

For whom should we have pleaded this year, and did not? Do we sometimes manage to get ahead of events, rather than comment on them afterward?

SUBJECT 11

What G-d saw in Noah



PRESENTATION

Rashi opens the parashah with two explanations: the text praises Noah because “the memory of the righteous is for a blessing”, or because the generations of the righteous are their good deeds. But this verse of praise comes after the grace, not before. The Rav draws an unexpected conclusion from it.

THE QUESTION

If Noah did not deserve to escape the flood, why did he find grace?

THE ANSWER

Rashi on Bereshit 6:9; “The memory of the righteous is for a blessing, but the name of the wicked shall rot” (Mishlei 10:7); “Be a blessing” (Bereshit 12:2).

In principle, Noah should have disappeared with his generation. Rashi seems to justify the grace: Noah is tsaddik, tamim, he walks with Elokim, his generations are his good deeds. But if this verse were the reason for the grace, it should have come before it. Since it comes after, that is not what G-d took into account.

The full verse contrasts the memory of the righteous, which is for a blessing, with the name of the wicked, doomed to decay. Who, then, is this righteous one? It is not Noah, who did not even intervene for his generation. The righteous one worthy of the blessing is the one to whom it was said: “be a blessing”. That was said to Avraham.

So there is something of Avraham in Noah. If he escapes the flood, it is because G-d's vision, in this re-creation of humanity, is aimed at Avraham, who will truly set history in motion.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is because Noah benefits from this project of Avraham that he finds grace in the eyes of the L-rd.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What do we receive today thanks to someone who will come after us — a child, a student, a project? And what of the future would we like others to see in us?