

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

NOACH

11 Questions for the Shabbat Table

Eleven questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Noach: The Tower of Babel”: humanity's last crisis before
Avraham, a sin the text does not name, and the birth of the family
as the ark is left behind. One thesis runs through the whole
lecture: evil is not diversity, it is uniformity.



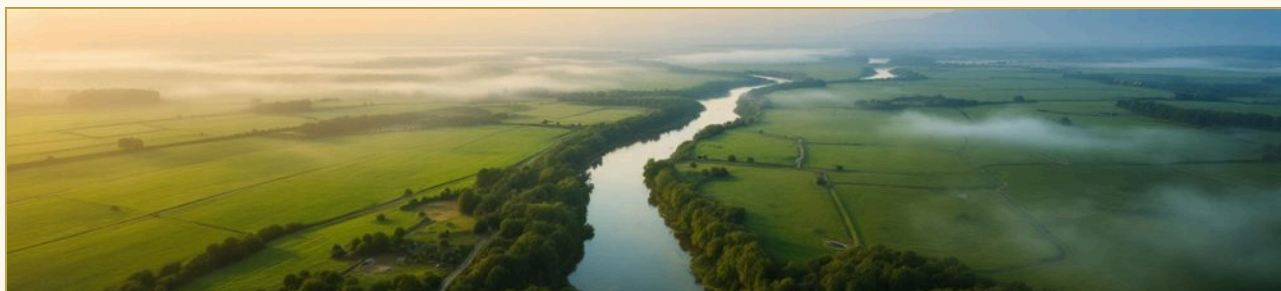
Rav Raphaël Benizri

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

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One language, seventy readings



PRESENTATION

Four hundred years after the flood, “the whole earth had one language and the same words”. Rashi specifies: the holy tongue. The Rav notes at once that the text does not say what this generation's sin consisted of. It must be sought in its very words.

THE QUESTION

Can we speak the same language without saying the same thing?

THE ANSWER

“The whole earth had one language and the same words” (Bereshit 11:1); Rashi: the holy tongue.

The devarim achadim, these “same” words, point to the languages that will be distributed among the seventy nations: they are modes of interpretation, modes of perception. For one can speak the same language and perceive its meaning differently, each according to his sensibility, his intellectual level, his subtlety of mind.

Just as at creation a river went out from the Garden of Eden and divided into four streams, the humanity descended from Shem, Ham and Yefet divided into different streams — which the Rav links to the four letters of the divine Name.

And these generations were not primitive: they had developed philosophy, mathematics, physics, commerce, industry, music. They were in love with creation, competitive with one another. The essential point is that they shared an intuition of the sacred. What they would do with it is another question.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We can always speak the same language, yet perceive its meaning differently.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Have we ever had an argument in which everyone used the same words without saying the same thing? Which word, at home, does not mean the same to everyone?

SUBJECT 02

The ark, a new creation



PRESENTATION

G-d asks Noah to take into the ark a pair of every species. But for the family of man, it is not a couple that enters: it is Noah, his sons, his wife and his sons' wives. Two generations.

THE QUESTION

Why a flood rather than an epidemic — and why two generations in the ark, when a single couple would have sufficed?

THE ANSWER

“Noah went in, and his sons, and his wife, and his sons' wives with him, into the ark” (Bereshit 7:7).

G-d could have done away with the generation through an epidemic: there was no need for a flood to wipe out humanity and return to the chaos in which water covered everything. If the flood took place, it is because the aim was to launch a new creation, as if the previous creation had been only a rough draft. The ark is a microcosm meant to ensure a new humanity.

Hence the pair of every species. But with a single human couple, humanity could also have been perpetuated. If there are two generations, it is because something new is beginning.

Until then, the generations were listed as separate individuals: each one and his offspring, without being tied to parents or grandparents, then “and he died”, as if that death left room for no inheritance. From Adam to Noah, even within the same family, there was no relationship of father to child.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

From now on we will witness the birth of the family, of the community.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What makes a household a family rather than a collection of individuals? What do we know of our grandparents, and what do we owe them?

SUBJECT 03

Why does his wife enter after the children?



PRESENTATION

On entering the ark, the text says: Noah and his sons, and his wife and his sons' wives. The children separate the man from his wife. On leaving, G-d says exactly the reverse: go out, you and your wife, your sons and your sons' wives.

THE QUESTION

Why is the order of the words reversed at the entry and at the exit — and why does Noah, on leaving, still hesitate?

THE ANSWER

Rashi on Bereshit 7:7: the men apart, the women apart; “Go out of the ark, you and your wife” (Bereshit 8:16).

The text should have said Noah and his wife, then the sons and their wives. If it separates the couples, our sages read in it a recommendation: when an epidemic rages, when war knocks at our doors, when famine sets in, it is better to wait before bringing children into the world. This, says the Rav, is the only birth regulation found in the Torah. On leaving, the order is reversed: “go out, you and your wife” — you may resume your married life.

But Noah will still wait for some time. Faced with a disaster that wiped out everything, he wonders whether it is still worth bringing children into the world. It was already Adam's concern when he saw Kayin kill his brother.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

When famine rages, when war threatens and when an epidemic wreaks havoc, it is better to wait.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There are times when life is held back, and others when it must be relaunched. Where are we: at the entrance to the ark or at the exit? And what are we waiting for to resume what the ordeal made us suspend?

Where the children take over



PRESENTATION

On leaving the ark, for the first time, G-d blesses not a man but a whole family: “Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth”. And in the list of generations that follows, from Noah to Avraham, a word has disappeared.

THE QUESTION

What changes in the world when the family appears?

THE ANSWER

“Elokim blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them: Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth” (Bereshit 9:1); Shem and Yefet cover their father (Bereshit 9:23).

In principle, prophecy is addressed to a person, not a family; G-d revealed Himself to an entire people only at Sinai. But to this new humanity, G-d gives His first revelation, the seven Noahide laws, and He speaks to the whole family. “Fill the earth”: above all, do not concentrate in a single place; spread out, truly occupy the whole earth.

The family is now established, consecrated. We will see parents who watch over their children, and children imbued with respect for their parents: that is what Shem and Yefet show when they cover their father's nakedness.

And in the list of the generations from Noah to Avraham, the term vayamot, “and he died”, no longer appears. They have sons and daughters, but there is no more mention of dying.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

There is no death when there are children who take over.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What of our grandparents still lives at this table? And what of ourselves would we like to continue in our children?

The misfortune of a single language



PRESENTATION

The account begins with vayehi, “and it was” — a word that, each time it opens a story, announces a misfortune. And it says safah, the lip, rather than lashon, the tongue. The Rav pauses on these two details.

THE QUESTION

What harm is there in everyone speaking the same language?

THE ANSWER

“Vayehi: the whole earth had one language” (Bereshit 11:1).

Each time the text begins with vayehi, it is a cry of misfortune, the announcement of an evil event. And it says safah, not lashon. Safah means the lips: an external language. Lashon, the tongue against the palate, is an inner language, the one that refines all things. Safah equals 385, lashon 386: one degree more, the one that allows all other idioms to be integrated and brought back to their source. That is the difference between the holy tongue and mere language.

These first generations lived the sacred from within, not as an intellectual pursuit, and their perceptions were varied. But the day one swears by a single interpretation, a single perception, a single language, sensibilities die.

Safah also means the edge, like the shore of the sea: they were all on the same side. And the secondary perceptions ended up prevailing over the intuition of the holy tongue.

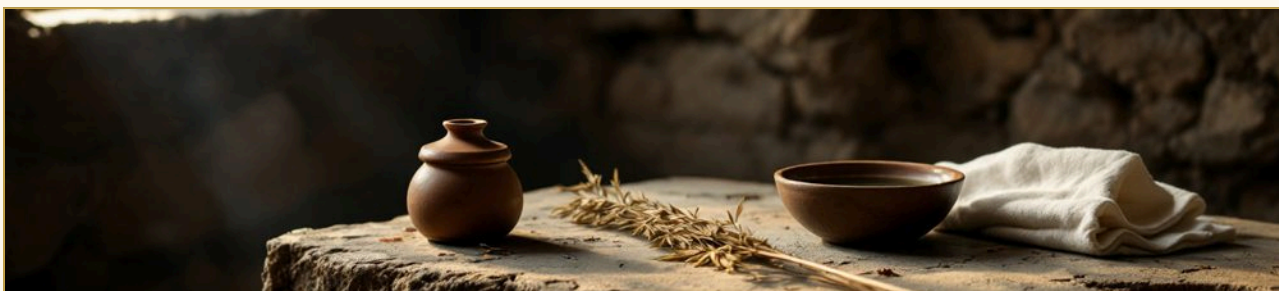
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

When people begin to swear by one single interpretation, and kill off the different sensibilities, then it is a misfortune.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In our family, is there only one “authorized” way of seeing things? Who has had to silence his sensibility to keep the table calm?

Where does the holy tongue come from?



PRESENTATION

The Rav opens a parenthesis: what is the Hebrew language? A convention people developed over time to name things, or a creation, the language of the sacred? The Rambam and the Ramban do not answer in the same way, and the reading of the verse depends on it.

THE QUESTION

What makes a language holy: its origin, or the way it is spoken?

THE ANSWER

The Rambam (Guide for the Perplexed) and the Ramban (commentary on the Torah): two conceptions of the holy tongue.

For the Ramban, Hebrew is the language of the sacred, that of G-d's revelation to the people of Israel. For the Rambam, it has nothing sacred about it at first, except that it is a clean language: it does not even have names for the carnal organs, no vulgar words. A third view sees in it a code: just as chemical formulas designate compound substances, each Hebrew name would carry the components of what it names.

If one follows the Rambam, the language evolved; if one follows the Ramban, it was rather coarsened over time. The language changed, it was translated into Aramaic, and in the time of Ezra, when the exiles returned from Babylon, it experienced a rebirth — with the script called Ashurit, that of the Sefer Torah.

If a cut or deformed letter makes a Sefer Torah unusable until it is corrected, it is because this script is indeed the original script, which regained its value only in the time of Ezra.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is the purity, the cleanness of its language that raised it to the rank of holiness.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Is the way we speak at home “clean”? Which words would we like to banish from our table, and which would we like to hear there more often?

They wept for the brick and replaced the man



PRESENTATION

People find a valley, learn to fire bricks, and decide to build a city and a tower whose top will reach the heavens. The midrash tells what happened on the building site.

THE QUESTION

What is a person worth in a society where everyone is alike?

THE ANSWER

“Come, let us make bricks” (Bereshit 11:3); the midrash: when a brick fell, they wept; when a man fell, they replaced him.

The midrash says it bluntly: the person no longer counted; he was less important than the brick being made. When the building suffered a fall, they wept; when a man fell from the scaffolding, he was replaced at once.

Why? Because man had lost his uniqueness, his personality, his own perception of things. There is a sameness that prevents unity. If we are all there thinking the same thing and feeding on the same elements, what is the point of being a million, two million, three million people? In the end, we are all alike.

And if we are not different, there is no unity either. That is why G-d will make Avraham the unifier of all tendencies.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

There can be unity only if we are different from one another.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We more readily mourn a damaged project than a damaged person. This year, did I replace someone, or did I miss him? And who around me is now seen only through the role he fills?

SUBJECT 08

A clear language, not a single language



PRESENTATION

The prophet Tzefaniah announces a time when G-d will transform the speech of the peoples. One would expect Him to restore the single language of Babel. That is not what the verse says.

THE QUESTION

Must the whole world believe and practise in the same way for G-d to be recognized as one?

THE ANSWER

“For then I will turn to the peoples a clear language” (Tzefaniah 3:9); “In you shall all the families of the earth be blessed” (Bereshit 12:3).

It will not be a single language, but a clear language, safah berurah. Clear, because the values that bind together all these cultures, all these civilizations, all these beliefs are the same. The mode of perception differs, but there is a language capable of being the common denominator of all these sensibilities: the Hebrew language, as Avraham will be for humanity.

All of humanity does not have to practise Judaism. We must bring the different beliefs and the different individualities to converge toward the point where G-d is one and His Name one.

All the families of the earth will be blessed through Avraham — all of them, with their different beliefs.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We are not inclined to convert the world to a single belief.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Can we recognize, in someone who does not think as we do, values that are also ours? What common value could we name with a neighbour very different from us?

SUBJECT 09

A tower that reaches the heavens



PRESENTATION

“Let us build ourselves a city and a tower whose top reaches the heavens.” Behind this project, the Rav sees Nimrod, the first king in history. And he asks what this generation really wanted to reach.

THE QUESTION

What was the generation of Babel really seeking in building its tower?

THE ANSWER

“Let us build ourselves a city and a tower whose top reaches the heavens” (Bereshit 11:4); Rashi on Bereshit 11:1.

The project of Babel was to remove G-d's presence from the march of history, founding unity on the development of industry, technological success, concentration in one place. A tower that reaches the heavens is an ideology that seeks to compete with the one that comes from heaven, able to occupy people's minds and gradually turn them away from their intuition of the sacred. Rashi reports the intention to wage war against the One, and to prop up the sky artificially so that it would not collapse as in the time of the flood.

That is what Nimrod, king of Babel, the first king in history, will achieve: he drives divine awareness out of the minds of the generations by developing an industry. It was he who sought to throw Avram into the furnace: Avram wanted variety, the sheaf of beliefs unified like the rainbow; Nimrod wanted to break humanity's dependence on the Creator.

He wanted people, busy with their livelihood, their family life, their plans for the future, to drift gradually away from the spiritual quest toward a less demanding spirituality. He succeeded.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

What Nimrod wanted was to create that void.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What in our days occupies our minds so much that there is no room left for the spiritual question? What could we remove from our “tower” this week?

SUBJECT 10

Not judging the hostage



PRESENTATION

When G-d is pushed away, the spiritual quest does not disappear: people look for it elsewhere, in their own philosophy. The Rav grants that this subjective quest is possible, but he sets a condition — and introduces a figure: the hostage.

THE QUESTION

How should we regard someone who knows nothing of his spiritual heritage?

THE ANSWER

“Let us make a name for ourselves” (Bereshit 11:4).

G-d is pushed away on one side, but the spiritual quest is sought elsewhere, in one's own philosophy, in one's own perception of things. Even the spiritual quest becomes subjective: each at his own level, each as he sees fit. That is possible, says the Rav, but on condition that it is not a hostage.

What is a hostage? Today, a man who grew up in a place where there was no community, no structure, no Jewish school. He landed there, or grew up there, through no choice of his own. Of spiritual life he knows nothing.

We do not have to judge him, we do not have to condemn him, we do not have to make him feel guilty.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is not his fault.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Do we know someone who grew up far from any tradition? How can we speak to him without judging him — and what could we offer him rather than reproach him with?

SUBJECT 11

Dispersion, an exile that makes one grow



PRESENTATION

G-d comes down to see the city and the tower, confuses the languages and scatters people over the face of the whole earth. This is usually read as a punishment. The Rav sees in it the same gesture as with Adam driven from the garden, on the scale of a humanity.

THE QUESTION

Is confusing the languages and scattering people a punishment or a remedy?

THE ANSWER

“The L-rd scattered them from there over the face of the whole earth” (Bereshit 11:8).

G-d is concerned: if there is a single way of thinking, a single practice, a single goal, it is the end of any possible union of humanity's different energies. Yet this union can be ensured only by the spiritual bond, by each person's search and quest. Communication will become difficult, but the quest will remain.

So He will scatter them through different languages and cultures, so that they can develop their personality. This development is secondary, incidental; its purpose is to bring all sensibilities to Avraham's single perception.

That is what G-d had done with Adam by condemning him to exile from the garden: the individual had to make the effort to rebuild himself. Here, it is society that will have to take itself in hand in order to fulfil itself.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The spiritual quest will be the only bond able to unite everyone.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

When our children go elsewhere and speak differently, is it a loss or an opportunity? What remains our bond when we are scattered?