

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

NOACH

12 Questions for the Shabbat Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture "Noach: The First Verse and the Three Creations of Man": almost the whole session rests on the first verse of Noach, every word of which is turned over. Man created, formed, then begotten; a missing vav so that the world can move forward; and the idea that opens the parashah: a man's generations begin with himself.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

Table of Topics

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

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SUBJECT 01

The Torah, our current events



PRESENTATION

This lecture opens a continuous study of the text, week after week. Before even reading the first verse of Noach, the Rav sets down a rule for reading: the figures of Bereshit are not characters from a distant past. They are the fathers, those who took it upon themselves to shape the history of their generation.

THE QUESTION

Why read the story of Adam, Noah or Avraham as though it were speaking about us?

THE ANSWER

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

Each of us carries within a little of Adam's destiny, of Noah's destiny, of the aspirations of Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, Yosef. If not throughout a lifetime, then at least for periods — sometimes a day, sometimes an hour. So when we open the book of the Torah, it is not a story of the past that we are dissecting: it is current events, those we live in private and those we live as a community.

Just as a population entrusts its destiny to the one who embodies an ideology, we entrust ours to a tsaddik, and we are there to serve him as much as he serves us. But the tsaddik himself cannot do as he pleases: the whole universe takes part in this story.

Each person is left a free choice, and it is what makes his merit. From time to time it is amended, sometimes withdrawn, so that man can correct the course of his own life.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

When we study the text of the Torah, it is our own story that is at stake.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In which episode of the Torah have we already recognized ourselves? Let each say at what moment of his life he was a little like Noah, and at what moment a little like Avraham.

Three creations of man



PRESENTATION

The Torah does not tell of man's coming into the world just once. In the first chapter, he is created; in the second, he is formed from clay; in the fifth, Adam begets a son "in his likeness, after his image". The Rav reads in this three realities of man.

THE QUESTION

Why does the Torah tell of man's birth three times — and what changes from one to the next?

THE ANSWER

"Let us make man in our image" (Bereshit 1:26); "The L-rd Elokim formed man" (Bereshit 2:7); "he begot in his likeness, after his image" (Bereshit 5:3).

The first man is created in the image and likeness, the culmination of all creation. G-d invests Himself in it: "let us make man", a plural — you, man, and I, let us make man. This man is both masculine and feminine, created simultaneously: neither before nor after, with no dependence of one on the other.

The second is no longer created; he is formed from clay, and receives an awareness of being onto which speech will later be grafted, as with a child who feels before he speaks. No blessing says "who creates man", but "who forms man": formation makes us a diversity of persons and sensibilities, no longer a single model.

The third is begotten in the image of man, and no longer in that of G-d. The original divine deposit is there, but this variety I bring into the world takes part in a covenant. That is where free choice comes in, given to man so that he may complete with his Creator what has been created.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The Torah has told us that there are three realities in man.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What have we received as is, what have we formed ourselves, and what do we pass on "in our image"? In our family, what must resemble a single model, and what has the right to be different?

SUBJECT 03

A missing vav, a chance for the world



PRESENTATION

The word toldot, generations, can be written with two vavs. In the whole Bible, says the Rav, it is written in full only twice: for the heavens and the earth, and in the book of Ruth. Everywhere else a vav is missing, sometimes the first, sometimes the last.

THE QUESTION

If the generations of men are almost always “defective”, is that a misfortune?

THE ANSWER

“These are the generations of the heavens and the earth” (Bereshit 2:4); “These are the generations of Peretz” (Ruth 4:18).

The vav is the letter of truth, of authenticity, of stability, of coordination in time and space: the letter of a being’s connection. When it is missing, that connection is faulty, defective.

Yet it is precisely because it is faulty that the world can move forward. Were the world perfect, with nothing left to do, we would live a fullness in total passivity: no more tension, and the world would not move forward. Our sages even paid tribute to the generations that opened the way of sin before us, without which we would have had no merit.

Between the two complete toldot — the starting point of universal history and its messianic culmination, which takes shape through the book of Ruth — there will always remain dark, blurred zones that force us to seek another light in order to move forward.

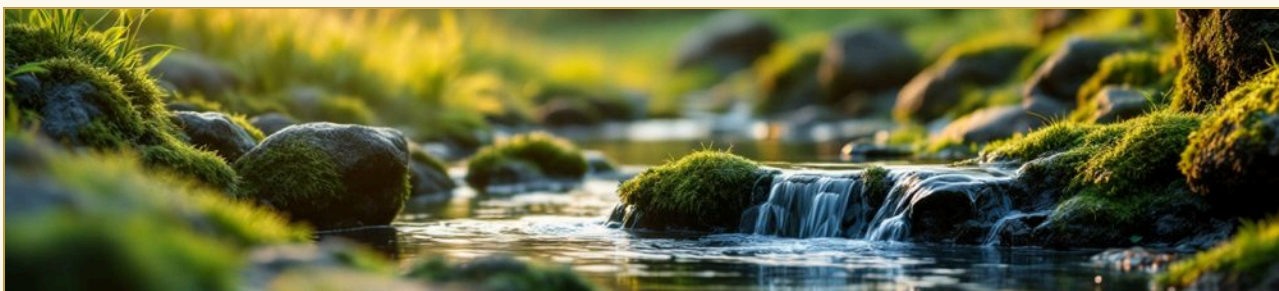
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is the sense of imperfection that gives history its full measure of being.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What in our home remains “incomplete” and forces us to move forward? Has an imperfection in our family ever been the occasion for real progress?

The gentle revenge of the feminine



PRESENTATION

“It is not good for man to be alone.” And yet woman had been created at the same time as man. Why must she then be separated from him — and does that not place her in a position of dependence?

THE QUESTION

Why does the feminine appear only after the fact, and who, man or woman, really gains from it?

THE ANSWER

“It is not good for man to be alone” (Bereshit 2:18).

Man must not remain alone, for he risks taking himself for a god and accomplishing nothing in this world: he would live in a Garden of Eden, a world where the idea of time and space does not exist. Without this separation, there would be no openness, no critique, no emulation, no assistance, no recognition of the other. It is from it that everything will come about.

The appearance of the feminine thus comes a posteriori, once it was seen that man could not live alone. What may seem diminishing — depending on an amputation of the masculine — turns into a gentle revenge: it is she who later becomes the origin of everything, the source, she who ensures the generations.

And these generations will be perfect when the contribution comes from outside, as in the line of Ruth the Moabite: not a turning inward, but a spirit of openness to the outside world.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

She is the source, she is the one who ensures the generations, she is the toldot.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What would we never have discovered had we remained alone? Let each name a person whose difference helped him grow.

SUBJECT 05

Naked, and unashamed



PRESENTATION

Before the sin, the text says of Adam and his wife that they were both naked and were not ashamed. This is usually read as lost innocence. The Rav reads something else: the starting point of the sin.

THE QUESTION

Where does the sin of Adam and Chavah begin, long before the fruit?

THE ANSWER

“They were both naked, the man and his wife, and they were not ashamed” (Bereshit 2:25); “This time, this one is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Bereshit 2:23).

Nakedness, as long as one is alone in a house, is no embarrassment. Embarrassment begins when there are two of us and one's intimacy is no longer respected by the other: intimacy has been made a public place; private life has been confused with that of others. Then a garment is needed; each must find again, somewhere, his intimate life, his own home.

Adam and Chavah lived in a public world, without intimacy; it did not occur to them to make themselves a little house to withdraw into. And the serpent, which dwells within man, waits only for moments of weakness: it is at the height of this intimacy that it slips in to tear it down.

Conversely, man's first word bursts forth when he finds the woman facing him: “bone of my bones”. As long as awareness of the other does not assert itself, we remain in a world of violence and non-recognition.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Awareness of the other in relation to oneself is the starting point of history.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

At home, does each person have a place, a time, a part of life that belongs to him alone? What do we do to respect the other's intimacy, even in a house where everything is shared?

What Noah begets first



PRESENTATION

The parashah opens with the generations of Noah. The reader expects a genealogy: he receives the portrait of a man. The Rav pauses on these first words, and on the small word eleh, “these”, that introduces them.

THE QUESTION

What does a man beget first, if not his children?

THE ANSWER

“These are the generations of Noah: Noah was a righteous man” (Bereshit 6:9); our sages: the generations of the righteous are their deeds.

No story unfolds without generations, and everything is invested in children and grandchildren: that is the greatest success of a life. But we have been taught that the toldot of the righteous are their deeds. We beget ourselves, we fulfil ourselves, and this self-fulfilment is our story, that of our community and that of the universe.

What Noah begets, then, is not first of all his children: it is himself. One must fulfil oneself within one's shell, in one's private life, in one's intimacy. The children will be what I have made of myself, and not what I have projected for them outside myself.

And the word eleh, “these”, sets aside what came before: it is a new starting point. There is a chain of history, but one may find oneself in the link or in the gap. The generations the Torah paraded before Noah were unfinished stories, left in the gap of the chain.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

First, one must fulfil oneself.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What do our children see of what we make of ourselves, beyond what we ask of them? And what “new start” would each of us like to make this year?

Eleh: the scent of the golden calf



PRESENTATION

The Rav reports a daring remark of our sages: the word eleh, “these”, is like a diminutive of Elokim — and the word recurs in the cry of the golden calf, “These are your gods, Israel”. Why does this small word carry a whiff of idolatry, and why does Noah appear precisely there?

THE QUESTION

Why is following the crowd, the numbers, the current, already a form of idolatry?

THE ANSWER

“These are your gods, Israel” (Shemot 32:4); “they took wives for themselves, whomever they chose” (Bereshit 6:2).

When we go all in for quantity, we go the way of idolatry: when we follow the current of every comer, every ideology, every philosophy, without living from within what we are. That is what the people did at the golden calf: in a moment of despair, it gave in to any leader, any philosophy, just to have landmarks.

Now Noah appears when society multiplies and the sense of individuality is lost: one becomes a number, an anonymous face. What counts then is taking whatever woman one wants; intimacy tips over into debauchery. Once again quantity takes precedence over quality — the way certain powers divert peoples from their course by opening all the floodgates, under cover of laissez-faire.

So G-d changes course. He does not regret: He no longer stakes everything on society as a whole but on quality, on the righteous man of the generation — not one who lives like an angel, but one who has a message to give and a balanced way of life to offer.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The course must be changed.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Which habits do we follow only because “everyone does it”? And in what area do we have the courage to be few and of quality rather than many?

Ish rather than Adam



PRESENTATION

The verse says of Noah that he was ish, tsaddik, tamim — a man, righteous, whole — “in his generations”. And his very name, Noah, comes from a word the Rav refuses to translate as consolation or regret: he hears in it a change of direction.

THE QUESTION

Why is it better to be ish than Adam, and what does it mean to be whole “in his generations”?

THE ANSWER

“Noah was a righteous man, whole in his generations” (Bereshit 6:9).

To be Adam is to take upon oneself the problems of all humanity: that is beyond our capacities. Facing Adam is the adamah, the earth, which reminds him that he is limited in time and space; facing the ish is the islah. The title ish calls for responsibility, for personality. Moshe is an ish: what concerns him most is the destiny of his people. Enough grand talk about the destiny of humanity: begin with your own, that of your family, that of your society.

Tamim does not mean naive. Perfection exists only in the mind: everyone has his faults, everyone suffers from a lack, and fortunately so, for that is how exchange happens and responsibilities are shared. Tamim remains a line of conduct, a criterion, but in relation to oneself, to one's own possibilities.

And always in relation to one's generation. In Avraham's, the challenge would have been greater: Noah would have measured himself against it, or given up, because it was too much for him.

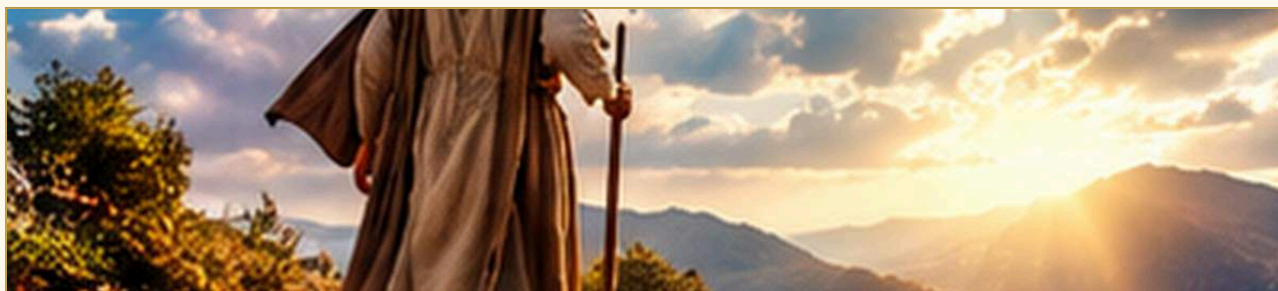
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

One must limit oneself to what one can achieve, what one can do, what is possible.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We often compare ourselves with other generations and other lives. What is the right demand for me, in my place, with my means? And what are we putting off by talking too grandly about the destiny of the world?

Walking with G-d, or before Him



PRESENTATION

The verse says that Noah “walked with Elokim”. Of Avraham it will be said that he walked before G-d. And Rashi reports that Noah entered the ark only when the waters forced him in. A listener points out the paradox: how could one who walks with G-d have doubted?

THE QUESTION

What separates the one who walks with G-d from the one who walks before Him — and why did Noah wait until the last minute?

THE ANSWER

“Noah walked with Elokim” (Bereshit 6:9); Rashi on Bereshit 7:7: he entered the ark only when the waters forced him in.

To walk with Elokim is strictness toward oneself and kindness toward others. With oneself, one must not be lenient: one must be demanding. One does not get one's mistakes forgiven; one corrects them, one mends one's ways.

But walking hand in hand with G-d can be held against him. It is better to be able to announce G-d's coming along the way than to hold His hand because one could not keep one's balance without Him. To walk before is to advance with far more confidence and serenity, without fear of faltering, tipping over, falling.

As for the ark: in the dialogue between man and the absolute, there is always, in the background, a challenge thrown at the other — let me see how far you will go. Noah did not believe G-d would destroy His work: that would be the failure of that work. It is hard, even for an artist, to tear up the painting into which he has put so much energy. So Noah waited until the last minute, then, with no other option, withdrew into his ark.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

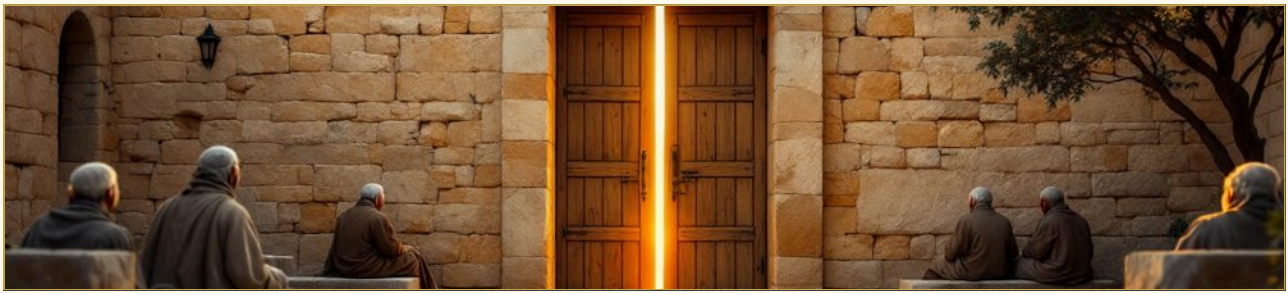
One must not get one's mistakes forgiven; one must correct them.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In what area do we hold someone's hand because we do not dare to move forward alone? And which mistake have we merely had forgiven, instead of correcting it?

SUBJECT 10

Democracy according to the Torah



PRESENTATION

A listener objects: the Rav seemed to say that democracy means “everyone does as he pleases”. Democracy, he argues, means allowing each person to act within precise rules. Was the Rav speaking of democracy, or of anarchy?

THE QUESTION

Where is the line between a free society and a society in which everyone does as he pleases?

THE ANSWER

“Choose for yourselves wise men, understanding and known... and I will set them at your head” (Devarim 1:13).

The Rav was speaking not of democracy but of anarchy: that of Noah's time, when man gives in to a pluralism of being in which everyone does what he wants, as he wants. It is the world of debauchery in which our society lives at a very advanced stage — and that is nothing new.

Democracy as the Torah understands it is what Moshe asks of the people before entering the Land of Israel: call on responsible people, wise, understanding, virtuous, capable of being the model for society, and put them at your head — if only so that they can be the moral guardians of your society.

Within this structure, each person fulfils himself in his own way, according to his sensibilities, his possibilities, his capacities. But freedom there is not laissez-faire: the Torah has set its limits.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

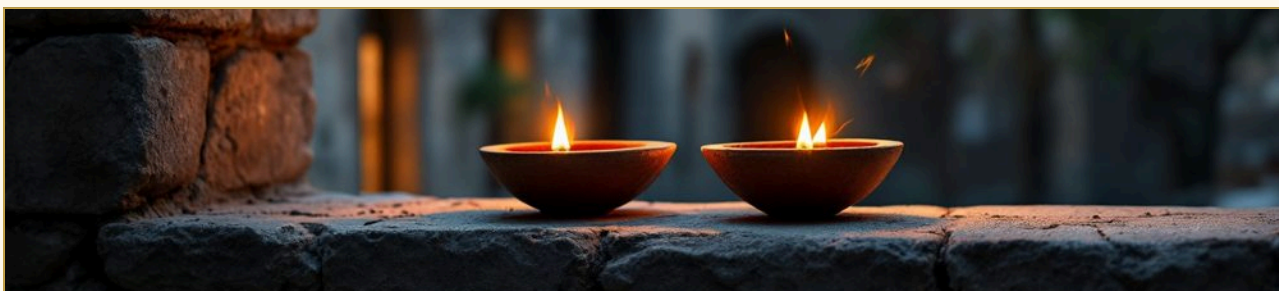
There are barriers, there are guardrails.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What are the “barriers” of our home, and who set them? Who around us deserves to be a model, and why?

SUBJECT 11

Why would G-d want to be recognized?



PRESENTATION

A second question from the same listener: if the world was perfect, why did G-d create it so that it would become imperfect? And above all, why would He need a world, and to be recognized? The Rav begins by admitting that the very word used to name Him bothers him.

THE QUESTION

Does an all-powerful Being need our recognition?

THE ANSWER

Our sages: G-d desired a dwelling in the lower worlds.

The Rav says he is uneasy with the word, which today is given a somewhat idolatrous connotation. He speaks of this transcendent, all-powerful spirit who ceded His power to man: alone, there is no recognition, there is no world. G-d did not want a world in which man, passive, would be merely His subject and not His partner in the work of creation.

But this recognition does not go from subject to king. It goes from one citizen to another. Let us leave G-d in peace and talk among ourselves: you want me to recognize you, don't you? This mutual recognition can only come by way of an absolute we share, despite our pettiness, our narrow lives and our different sensibilities.

G-d wanted to dwell here below, and not remain in the upper spheres. His realization in this world is His presence: in you, in the other, in me.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Recognition is not that of the subject toward the king.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Who at this table is waiting to be recognized and has not been recognized enough? Let each tell another what he recognizes in him.

SUBJECT 12

The silence of Noah's wife



PRESENTATION

A listener is surprised: the parashah speaks of the re-creation of the world, and the one who should be its symbol, Noah's wife, disappears. No Chavah, no Sarah: nothing. The Rav answers that this silence is intended by the text.

THE QUESTION

Why is Noah's wife silent, and how should we read the words “he shall rule over you”?

THE ANSWER

“Your desire shall be toward your husband, and he shall rule over you” (Bereshit 3:16).

The Rav offers the beginning of an answer: Noah's wife took seriously the words addressed to the woman after the sin, “he shall rule over you”. Yet this reading must be corrected: it is not about imposing one's will, but about being an example, a model for the other — the word that says “rule” is related to the one that says “example”. This silence will recur elsewhere: with Avraham, Sarah makes herself heard only regarding her child.

And what is Noah's merit? It is said that he invented the plough. That is not a technical merit: it is that he countered the curse of the ground, sought to neutralize it and give it a positive meaning, turning it toward the formation of man and the fulfilment of his person.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Man's exclusion from the Garden of Eden should be seen not as a punishment, but as a will to repair.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In our family, does authority come through orders or through example? And what “curse” — a difficulty, a failure — have we managed to turn into an occasion to grow?