

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

PEKUDEI

12 Questions for the Shabbat Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Pekudei: The Inner Tabernacle”: the sanctuary we carry with us
even when the walls fall. Why it is called a pledge, why Betzalel
is right against Moshe about the order of the work, and why the
satisfaction of duty done is a poison.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

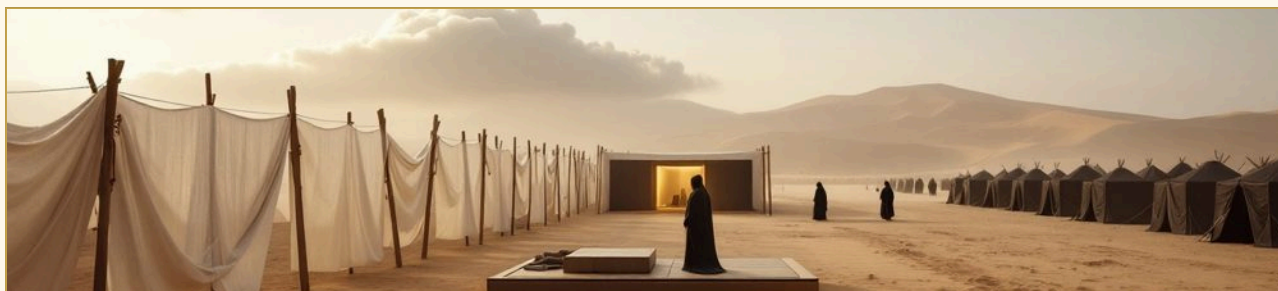
Table of Topics

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

-
- | | |
|-----------|--|
| 01 | Bearing the Likeness of G-d Within |
| <hr/> | |
| 02 | A Sanctuary Called a “Pledge” |
| <hr/> | |
| 03 | Where Did Betzalel Get His Art? |
| <hr/> | |
| 04 | Where to Begin: the Ark or the Walls? |
| <hr/> | |
| 05 | Why a Handmaid's Son Beside a King's Son? |
| <hr/> | |
| 06 | The Words of the Servants Are Worth More Than the Torah of the Children |
| <hr/> | |
| 07 | The Bible Could Have Closed Here |
| <hr/> | |
| 08 | A Foreign Graft in Life |
| <hr/> | |
| 09 | The Same Request Twice |
| <hr/> | |
| 10 | The Fathers Were Never Proud |
| <hr/> | |
| 11 | The Law of the House and the Law of the Road |
| <hr/> | |
| 12 | The Stranger Who Worked Only the Copper |
| <hr/> | |

SUBJECT 01

Bearing the Likeness of G-d Within



PRESENTATION

The book of Shemot comes to a close: the cloud envelops the Tent of Meeting and the glory of G-d fills the Tabernacle. For the Rav, the world has become the receptacle of divine providence. But a revelation presupposes someone who reveals it.

THE QUESTION

What does it mean that man is made “in the likeness of G-d” — and on what condition can he reveal G-d in the world?

THE ANSWER

“The cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the L-rd filled the Tabernacle” (Shemot 40:34); “in the likeness (bidmut) of Elokim He made him” (Bereshit 5:1).

This world is the work of Elokim, says the Rav. And if the world is the work of Elokim, Elokim reveals Himself through this world. But who can reveal Him? The one who bears within himself demut Elokim, the likeness of G-d. What does that mean? Not a likeness from a physical or bodily point of view. The only way to express it is to say that man is capable of bearing the divine within him, and capable of revealing it.

To reveal it, he must make his own the kinds of holiness we have spoken of. First the sublime holiness of Shabbat, holiness in time, which is the essence of everything. The first word of the Torah, Bereshit, is a snapshot of time in the absolute; it is what sets the creation of the world in motion, and we have already said that the word Shabbat can be read in it.

G-d's final stage was to bring the people of Israel into Shabbat and give them a hold over time, so that they themselves could manage time. But they can do so only if they live in this absolute holiness of Shabbat: it is what consecrates the people of Israel. Only then can they consecrate space — and the consecration of space is the Sanctuary.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The only way to express it is to say that man is capable of bearing the divine within him, and capable of revealing it.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Resembling G-d is not a matter of appearance. What in our way of life reveals something divine to those around us? And are we masters of our time, or is time managing us?

A Sanctuary Called a “Pledge”



PRESENTATION

The Torah does not call this dwelling mikdash but mishkan. Our Sages hear in this name the word mashkon: a pledge, a mortgage. The Sanctuary is thus declared destructible even before it is completed.

THE QUESTION

Why build with such care a dwelling that we know in advance may be taken back?

THE ANSWER

Mishkan understood as mashkon, a pledge; the Sanctuary called Ohel Mo'ed, the Tent of Meeting.

If it was built nonetheless, says the Rav, it is because everything depends on what man will make of it. If man takes in both the holiness of time and the holiness of space, the place becomes an Ohel Mo'ed, a space of meeting with the divine, truly in constant motion: then it will endure.

But as soon as man settles into a routine and begins to regard holiness as static, incapable of renewal, of revival, of innovation, then there is saturation, there is death. Death is not something G-d confers: it is something man imposes on himself. He imposes it on himself when he sets himself limits, when he stops seeing further, innovating, creating.

Yet G-d, even in creating the world, keeps remaking it all the time. To be able to do the same, one would have to develop within oneself this spiritual love, this love of the absolute.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Death is not something G-d confers; it is something man imposes on himself.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We sometimes call faithfulness what is only repetition. What practice have we been repeating identically for years without adding anything to it? And what could we innovate in it this week without leaving the framework?

Where Did Betzalel Get His Art?



PRESENTATION

Betzalel and Oholiav excelled in jewelry, tanning, and weaving with gold and silver. Yet the people had just emerged from two hundred and ten years of slavery, in which they had excelled only at building monuments.

THE QUESTION

How do slave builders become goldsmiths overnight — and what in them made this gift possible?

THE ANSWER

“Betzalel son of Uri son of Chur, of the tribe of Yehudah... and with him Oholiav son of Achisamach, of the tribe of Dan” (Shemot 38:22–23).

One wonders, says the Rav, where this artistic sense came from. How could they, overnight, turn into jewelers and produce this work of art that the Sanctuary was down to its smallest details, when for two hundred and ten years they had been reduced to slavery? They excelled only at building monuments, not at the jeweler's art, nor at tanning hides, nor at making garments woven with gold and silver.

But they had acquired this wisdom because they had developed within themselves this sense of perfection. So this intuition, this gift, was given to them from above: they were invested by G-d in their functions.

The gift from above thus answers a demand worked at below. For the Sanctuary not to become saturated, one must, like them, develop within oneself this love of the absolute.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

They had acquired this wisdom because they had developed within themselves this sense of perfection.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We readily put other people's talents down to luck. What high standard do we cultivate without anyone asking it of us? And what talent have we given up developing, telling ourselves: that's not for me?

Where to Begin: the Ark or the Walls?



PRESENTATION

Moshe passes on the order: first the furnishings of the Sanctuary, then its framework. Betzalel objects: if I begin with the furnishings, where will I put them in the meantime? Moshe agrees with him: you were in the shadow of G-d.

THE QUESTION

Was Moshe not able to understand this himself — or did he see, from where he stood, something other than what Betzalel saw?

THE ANSWER

Moshe to Betzalel: “Perhaps you were in the shadow of G-d (betzel El)?” (Berachot 55a; Rashi on Shemot 38:22).

There are two different modes of thought here, on two levels, says the Rav. Moshe is a man who climbed Mount Sinai. He perceives the word of G-d panim el panim, from inwardness to inwardness; he perceives it in its depth. For him, what matters first and foremost is the Holy of Holies: this place, with its ark holding the tablets of the law, must be able to radiate beyond the curtain. One had to start from there.

But Betzalel says to him: careful. Do not forget those who were seduced by the idea of the golden calf, those who had focused all their belief on the man Moshe. That is the people: they must be initiated little by little into the life of the spirit; they will not reach holiness at once. So first the framework of the Sanctuary, then little by little its elements, and finish with the ark, with the Holy of Holies.

Betzalel carried within him this love of the simplest of the people, of those he could bring closer, those for whom this Sanctuary was mainly intended.

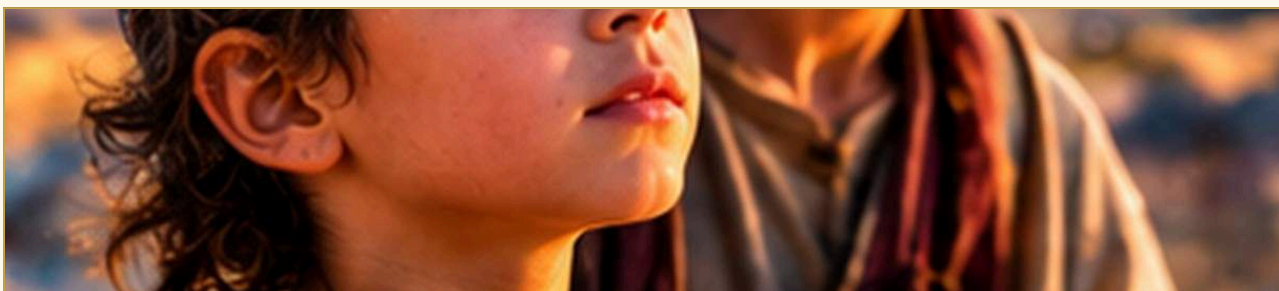
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

They will not reach holiness at once.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We often want others to come in by the way we came in. Have we imposed on a child, a friend, a newcomer a summit he could not yet climb? With what more modest “wall” could we have begun with him?

Why a Handmaid's Son Beside a King's Son?



PRESENTATION

Betzalel belonged to Yehudah, the royal tribe. His partner Oholiav was of the tribe of Dan, the son of a handmaid, in a family where the children of Leah and Rachel looked down somewhat on those of the handmaids.

THE QUESTION

Why could the people's holiest work not be entrusted to an elite alone?

THE ANSWER

“And with him Oholiav son of Achisamach, of the tribe of Dan” (Shemot 38:23); “the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the L-rd” (Yeshayahu 11:9).

Dan was the son of a handmaid brought into Yaakov's family circle, the Rav recalls. And the children of Rachel and Leah were somewhat disdainful toward the children of the handmaids, Bilhah and Zilpah. Yet it was not wanted that the Sanctuary be the work of an elite of people who had reached a cosmic vision of the world on their own and taken in Shabbat from the start. A share had to be left to the children who had been annexed — adopted, rather.

For adoption did not always succeed. Sarah had done the same with Hagar, but it did not succeed: Hagar was excluded from Avraham's house. Eliezer, the perfect disciple, faithful to Avraham's thought, did not leave descendants among the people of Israel either.

This Sanctuary is designed to serve not the Jewish people alone, but all the nations. Our Sages said that the Sanctuary is destined to extend to the whole city of Jerusalem, that the holiness of Jerusalem will extend as far as Damascus, and that of the land of Israel to the entire universe. We will truly reach the goal when the earth is filled with the knowledge of G-d.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It was not wanted that the Sanctuary be the work of an elite.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We often entrust what matters to those who resemble us. Who in our family or community has been welcomed without ever being truly included? What real share could we give him in what we are building?

The Words of the Servants Are Worth More Than the Torah of the Children



PRESENTATION

Our Sages highlighted a surprising saying: the conversation of the fathers' servants is finer than the Torah of the children. And in prayer we say: the G-d of Avraham, the G-d of Yitzchak, the G-d of Yaakov. Three times, though it is the same G-d.

THE QUESTION

Why repeat G-d's name three times for three men — and who keeps the children, as they innovate, from going beyond the limits?

THE ANSWER

“Finer is the conversation of the fathers' servants than the Torah of the children” (Bereshit Rabbah 60:8); “what the servant acquires, his master acquires” (Pesachim 88b).

The fathers' servants, says the Rav, are those so devoted to their master that everything they do, they do with such love, as if they were doing it for themselves, while knowing that it is their master who will benefit: everything the servant acquires goes to the master. Why are their words worth more than the Torah of the children? Because it is they who will push the children to remain unconditionally on the path of the parents.

Of course, each person will innovate his own path in the spiritual life, and that is accepted. But how does one avoid going beyond the borders, the limits? The ideal is to come to say: the G-d of Avraham, the G-d of Yitzchak, the G-d of Yaakov. Why repeat it, since it is the same G-d? Because the paths of access to the divine are different, but they remain faithful to Avraham's teaching, faithful to the source.

And who keeps them in this faithfulness to the source? The example set by the fathers' servants. That is why Oholiav, descendant of a handmaid who had wholly embraced Yaakov's life, takes part in building the Sanctuary.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The paths of access to the divine are different, but they remain faithful to Avraham's teaching; they remain faithful to the source.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We want our children to find their own path, and we fear they will leave ours. Who around us — a grandparent, a faithful friend — keeps up faithfulness without imposing a copy? And is our own path still connected to the source?

The Bible Could Have Closed Here



PRESENTATION

G-d's presence fills the Tabernacle; the cloud covers it by day, a fire shines in it by night before the eyes of the whole house of Israel. The goal seems reached. And yet the Torah continues for three more books.

THE QUESTION

If G-d has found His dwelling here below, why does the text not stop there — and what do the last words of the book say?

THE ANSWER

“Before the eyes of the whole house of Israel, in all their journeys” (Shemot 40:38); “before the eyes of all Israel” (Devarim 34:12).

The Bible could have stopped at the end of Pekudei, says the Rav, with the books of Vayikra, Bamidbar and Devarim placed perhaps in another volume. When G-d created the world, what He aspired to was a dwelling here below, a recognition: He obtained it. Indeed, the last verse of Pekudei — a fire shone in it by night before the eyes of the whole house of Israel — echoes the last words of the book of Devarim, of the entire book of the Torah.

So there is a similarity between the end of Shemot and the end of Devarim, but with one difference: bechol mas'eihem, in all their journeys. It is often translated “in all their stations”; that is not correct. A revelation of G-d took place through this Sanctuary, which took in the fire of the revelation at Sinai — there is nothing more to say about that.

But it is now that the journeys begin, because this must not remain a possession acquired exclusively by Israel. It must be a good that benefits all of humanity, all the peoples.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is now that the journeys begin, because this must not remain a possession acquired exclusively by Israel.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We call success the moment when we no longer have to move. What have we obtained that we consider permanently ours? And the beautiful things we have received — with whom do we share them beyond our home?

A Foreign Graft in Life



PRESENTATION

King Shlomo will turn the Mishkan, the tent that travels, into the Mikdash, a Temple of stone. Yet even this Temple will be destroyed, and the prophet Yechezkel will receive the plan of a third sanctuary. Stability always seems to slip away.

THE QUESTION

Why does the spiritual life always remain unstable — and is a Temple of stone enough to ensure its permanence?

THE ANSWER

The vision of the future Temple in the book of Yechezkel (chapter 43).

We were told that the Mishkan was a mashkon, a pledge, the Rav recalls. Why? Because this spiritual life always appears as a foreign graft in a life. It disturbs, because it does not fit easily into everyday life; it goes against nature, and so it always remains unstable.

How can it be given this stability, this permanence? It must be transformed into a Mikdash — and even then. In Yechezkel's prophecy, G-d asks him to show the plan of the Sanctuary: it is the third, for the Second Temple was not truly in the image of the first. It lacked five important elements, and it did not benefit from the revelation of the divine within it.

The first Temple did have it; and yet it was to be destroyed, quite simply because the hand of man had become mixed up in it. This opens the door to any divine service that would suffer from subjectivity.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

This spiritual life appears as a foreign graft in a life; it disturbs.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Our prayers, our study, our Shabbat sometimes disrupt our schedule. Where do we feel this “graft” resisting daily life? And what helps it take root in our home: a fixed habit, a place, companions?

The Same Request Twice



PRESENTATION

The work is completed, as was said of the heavens and the earth. Moshe feels the need to bless the work, and the Midrash tells which prayer he said: a verse from the psalm in which the same thing is asked twice.

THE QUESTION

Why, at the very moment everything has succeeded, must one ask twice that the work endure?

THE ANSWER

“May the favor of the L-rd our G-d be upon us; establish for us the work of our hands, the work of our hands, establish it” (Tehillim 90:17).

We must first distinguish, says the Rav, between melachah and avodah. Melachah consists in shaping an object for a use that may serve good or evil, the profane or the sacred: that is forbidden on Shabbat. Avodah, which ties the work exclusively to the divine service, is permitted. But throughout the making of the Mishkan a verb recurs, *asiyah*, doing, which recalls *na'aseh ve-nishma*: we will realize ourselves through what we will do.

Yet into this act of serving G-d there may creep a satisfaction with oneself, a sense of well-being, of duty done. And that is the poison of all service of G-d. From the moment man considers that he has complied with all of G-d's directives and has nothing to reproach himself with, he has turned his sanctuary into a *mashkon*, a pledge: it can be lost.

So every action must be accompanied by these two requests: the work of our hands, make it succeed; assist us in carrying it out. One can be a master in all things and lose everything through this feeling of satisfaction alone. One must always live with this fear, this concern to do well, this dread of a false step.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

One can be a master in all things and, through this feeling of satisfaction alone, lose everything.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In duty done there is a contentment that can close everything off. What are we most satisfied with this year? And what if that is precisely where we stopped moving forward?

SUBJECT 10

The Fathers Were Never Proud



PRESENTATION

Who is able to pray for his work without thinking himself its master? The Rav answers: the fathers' servants. Not the servants of the Torah or of the Sages, but of the fathers. And he gives as an example Yaakov returning to his father's home.

THE QUESTION

Why speak of the fathers' servants and not of the servants of the Torah — and how does a prayer become a blessing?

THE ANSWER

“Please, L-rd, save now! Please, L-rd, grant success now!” (Tehillim 118:25); “Yaakov settled in the land of his father’s sojournings (megurei)” (Bereshit 37:1).

G-d must also be an actor in what we undertake, says the Rav, and we must involve Him in everything we do, so that our prayer becomes a blessing. When prayer becomes a blessing, it is a source of success. It is the “please, L-rd, save now” that gives the assurance of the “please, L-rd, grant success now.”

Who is capable of this? The fathers' servants. Why not the servants of the Torah or of the Sages? Because the fathers did not have the Torah. They developed this within themselves, and they never showed the slightest arrogance, the slightest pride in what they had achieved. On the contrary, they remained on their guard.

Remember Yaakov: even after triumphing over his brother Esav, he arrives in the land where his father had lived. The text says megurei, which also comes from the verb yagor, to fear. He came with a feeling of fear: the fear of not being able to make his settlement in this land last.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

They never showed the slightest arrogance, the slightest pride in what they had achieved.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

After a success, we tend to settle in. How do we involve G-d in what we undertake — before, during, after? And what recent success would have deserved, instead of a little pride, a “please”?

SUBJECT 11

The Law of the House and the Law of the Road



PRESENTATION

G-d has obtained His dwelling here below, but now the road must begin. Which codes should accompany us? The Rav cites a formula of Rav Kook on the two books that follow Shemot: Vayikra and Bamidbar.

THE QUESTION

Do we behave the same way at home and on the road of exile — and what purpose do the stages of the desert serve?

THE ANSWER

Rav Kook: Vayikra, torat ha-bayit, the law of the house; Bamidbar, torat ha-derech, the law of the road.

Rav Kook used to say, the Rav reports, that Vayikra is the law of the house: how to behave at home, what sacrifices to make, how to live in society and in the family. Bamidbar is the code of conduct when we are in exile, objects of persecution, condemned to wander. One might distinguish the Torah of our home from the Torah of the outside, when we face the outside world.

But it is the same law. The proof: elements of the people's life in the desert are recorded in Shemot, and elements of the Sanctuary, such as the inauguration of the menorah, are found in Bamidbar. Vayikra was given at the foot of Sinai; Bamidbar begins in the second year, when the people leave the mountain and set out on the road.

This desert is the path of exile that must lead the people to settle in their land. The stages we follow through space are for us a way of showing the world our faith, our knowledge, of bearing witness to the sanctuary that dwells within us and that we carry with us, even if the walls are destroyed, whatever the cost.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

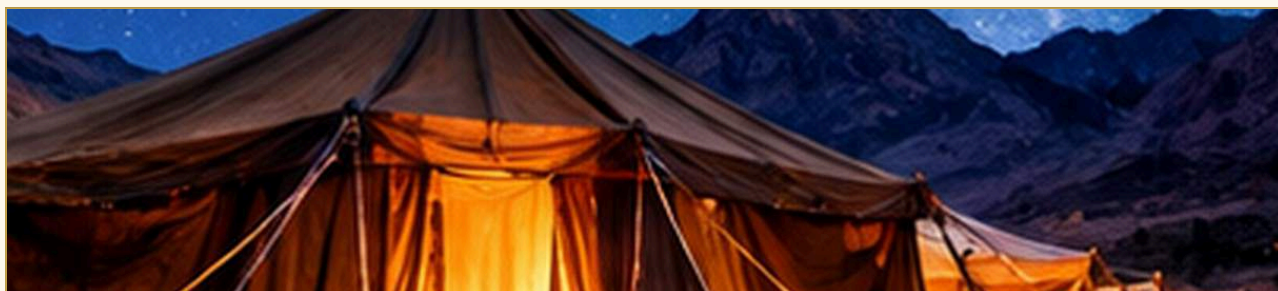
The sanctuary that dwells within us, that we carry with us even if the walls are destroyed, whatever the cost.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Are we the same at home and outside, at work, when traveling? What do we take of our “inner sanctuary” when we leave home? And what do others see of it?

SUBJECT 12

The Stranger Who Worked Only the Copper



PRESENTATION

For the Temple, Shlomo brought in workers sent by Hiram, king of Tyre. The one who stood out among them bore the same name: his father was from Tyre, his mother from the tribe of Naftali. And he dealt only with the copper elements.

THE QUESTION

What does this craftsman who came from outside, and was limited to copper, teach us about the place of foreign cultures in the service of G-d?

THE ANSWER

“For My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Yeshayahu 56:7); Hiram, “the son of a widow of the tribe of Naftali, and his father was a man of Tyre, a worker in copper” (I Melachim 7:14).

The aim, says the Rav, is to make the world recognize the values we carry — perhaps not as a whole, but little by little, from the outside in, as with one who returns. That is why, when inaugurating the Sanctuary, King Shlomo said that his house would be a house of prayer for all peoples, and why he involved in its construction foreign workers sent by Hiram, king of Tyre.

The one who stood out among them was born of a mixed marriage: his father was from Tyre, his mother from the tribe of Naftali. A path open to the nations: even someone who comes entirely from outside and has managed to join the Jewish people has his place in building the Sanctuary.

Perhaps he will not bring the whole Torah with him. Hiram dealt only with the bronze, the copper elements — all that glitters is not gold, and copper is one of those things. But these are elements of a foreign culture that can also be integrated into the divine service, provided they are integrated into the approach of the fathers' servants: serving the fathers' design, without straying from it.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

A path open to the nations is shown.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We sometimes expect others to bring everything, or nothing. Who around us has only “copper” to offer — and do we make room for him? What good thing have we received from another culture that we have managed to put at the service of our faith?