

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

SHEMOT

12 Questions for the Shabbat Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Shemot: Naming — the Meaning of Names”: what we do when
we name, why the history of Israel begins with exile, what Egypt
seeks to erase, and why Moshe is told not “go,” but “come.”



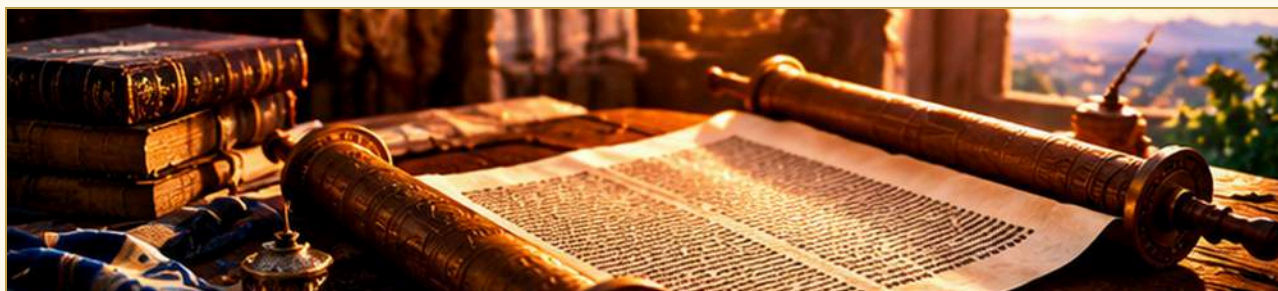
Rav Raphaël Benizri

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

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A Book Called “Names”



PRESENTATION

The second book of the Torah is called Shemot, “Names.” For the Rav, this title points to the very first task entrusted to man at his creation: to give a name to the beings and things around him — that is, to identify them.

THE QUESTION

What exactly do we do when we name something — and what is left to name once the world has been created?

THE ANSWER

“He called the light day, and the darkness He called night” (Bereshit 1:5); “Then they began to call upon the name of the L-rd” (Bereshit 4:26).

The name man gives is not a label: it is the very essence of the creature or the object. G-d Himself, in creating His world, names: He calls the light day and the darkness night. This means something: everything that remains obscure around us is truly night; everything we have discovered, on which we have cast light, becomes broad daylight for us. Man receives this power: he calls his wife ishah when he discovers her, and then “mother of all life” when she becomes a mother.

But it is not only the identity of the world that is being sought; it is also that of G-d. His reality is hidden in the world, blurred, as if in the night. In the generation of Enosh, people began to give Him a name, but this blurred name gave birth to idolatrous cults. Then comes Avraham, who proclaims the name of the L-rd — and the Rav notes the analogy between calling and crying out: to proclaim is to cry this name out across the universe.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It dwells within us, in our very depths, and we do not realize it: we must discover it and give it a name.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We give names every day — to our children, our projects, our troubles — without always weighing what we say. What name have we given to what is happening to us this year? Does that name shed light on the thing, or leave it in the night?

Bo: Two Letters for Knowing



PRESENTATION

To name, one must first know. The Rav pauses on the verb that carries this knowledge: bo, “to come.” A verb of only two letters, bet and aleph, which in Hebrew also designates the union of husband and wife.

THE QUESTION

Why is the verb “to come” the verb of knowledge — and what exactly did Adam do when G-d presented the animals to him?

THE ANSWER

“He brought them to the man to see what he would call them” (Bereshit 2:19).

The verb bo is written bet, aleph. In this order, says the Rav, it is not the aleph, unity, that splits into multiplicity: on the contrary, it is multiplicity that goes toward unity. In other words, it is when one lives in deep intimacy with the universe that one can probe its essence and give it a name.

Hence the word bi'ah, which designates the union of spouses: a woman is known intimately only in union. When G-d brings the animals before Adam, the Midrash in fact uses a disturbing expression. But one must not imagine a real relationship between man and the lion, or the serpent, or the dog.

It is an intimate knowledge, through which man discovers the essence of each animal: what its attributes are, what its function is, in what way it is indispensable to the whole of creation. And only then can he name it.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

When one lives in such intimacy with the universe, one can indeed probe its essence and give it a name.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We name well only what we have taken the time to know closely. Whom at this table do we think we know well enough to define in a word? Let each person say what he discovered this year about someone close, which he had not known.

Five Books, a Single Path



PRESENTATION

Each book of the Torah bears the name of its first parasha, but that name holds for the whole book. The Rav thus reads the five titles as the stages of a single path — and asserts that Bereshit and Shemot in fact form only one book.

THE QUESTION

Why would Bereshit and Shemot be one single book — and where does the rest of the path lead?

THE ANSWER

Bereshit, Shemot, Vayikra, Bamidbar, Devarim: five titles for a single path.

Bereshit is not only the genesis of the world: it is the genesis of the Jewish people through the patriarchs, the formation of the first family unit. But a genesis calls for a purpose, and this purpose must receive a name, discovered by the children of Israel. Now the purpose of creation is its reconstitution in miniature in the Mishkan, the Sanctuary. That is why Bereshit and Shemot are one.

Then comes Vayikra: it is no longer man who calls G-d, it is G-d who calls man, once man agrees to become a mobile sanctuary across the world. For that, one must accept Bamidbar, the desert, the place where our realities are put to the test: an identity comfortably settled, never forged in trial, has faced nothing.

Finally Devarim, the events: a book spoken by a man, Moshe, his response to the Torah. Events there are taken in hand by man, with the infinite that dwells within him. The Creator and the created find themselves associated in a single project.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

As long as the Sanctuary has not been set up, the purpose of the world remains somewhat ambiguous, undefined.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each of us also passes through these five books: an origin, a name, a call, a desert, a response. In which one are we at the moment? And what desert have we avoided, for fear it would put our identity to the test?

No Exile, No Project



PRESENTATION

The Rav repeats it: the project the Torah speaks of is universal, not national. And it begins with exile. Yet Avraham's story opens with a march toward the promised land. Why must one then go down to Egypt?

THE QUESTION

Why must the history of Israel pass through Egypt — and who, at bottom, comes out of Egypt?

THE ANSWER

Mitzrayim, from metzar: the partition, the straitjacket, the closed structure.

Avraham begins with a march forward toward the promised land, the laboratory of ideas and of the identity of all things. As long as the matter remains individual, that may suffice. But to see far ahead, one must go down to Egypt, considered the microcosm of the universe, the center of all cultures and all civilizations.

And the exodus is not what one thinks. It is not the Jewish people that came out of Egypt: it is Egypt that came out of its limits. Mitzrayim is a partition, a straitjacket, a closed structure. We freed this Egypt from enslavement to its idols, its cults, its civilization, to give it a much greater identity.

If we do not manage to bring the culture of the other nations out of their straitjacket, says the Rav, then we have done absolutely nothing.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

This project — I will never stop repeating it — is universal, not national; this project begins with exile.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There are “Egypt” we have gone down into in spite of ourselves: a country, a milieu, a job. What have we brought there that opens it a little beyond its limits? Or have we only sought to get out of it ourselves?

Sons Named After Exile



PRESENTATION

Yosef and Moshe follow almost the same path in Egypt. Both marry the daughter of a priest. And both inscribe their condition as strangers in the names of their children.

THE QUESTION

What is a man saying when he gives his sons the name of his exile?

THE ANSWER

“G-d has made me forget all my toil and all my father's house”; “G-d has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction” (Bereshit 41:51-52); “I have been a stranger in a strange land” (Shemot 2:22); “The G-d of my father was my help” (Shemot 18:4).

Yosef, pursued by his brothers for his universalist dreams, goes down to Egypt and there marries a priest's daughter. He names his first son Menashe: G-d has made me forget my toil and my father's house — he cuts short his brothers' narrow nationalism, they who did not want to hear his dreams. Then Ephraim: G-d has made me fruitful. And notice how he names Egypt: the land of my affliction, where I am a stranger. But he succeeded there.

He saved Egypt economically, he explained its dreams, and he gave it faith in Elokim — an immanent G-d, not yet transcendent: to discover that One and call Him by His name, one would have to pass through trials.

Moshe does the same: Gershom, for I am a stranger in a strange land; Eliezer, for the G-d of my father helps me and saved me from Pharaoh's sword. Yosef opened the people's descent into Egypt; Moshe carries out its ascent.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is paradoxical that these two leaders of the Jewish people should have had a similar path in Egypt.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We pass on our wounds without speaking of them; sometimes it would be better to name them. What have we called, in our home, “the land of my affliction” — and did we bear fruit there? What have we brought back from it that is not only for ourselves?

A Name That Is Not His Own



PRESENTATION

It is Pharaoh's daughter who names the child Moshe; in Egyptian, says the Rav, the word means “the son.” But the verse adds an “and she said” that seems superfluous, since she was already speaking.

THE QUESTION

Why does the liberator of Israel bear an undefined name for so long — and when does the people finally recognize him?

THE ANSWER

“She called him Moshe, and she said: for I drew him out of the water” (Shemot 2:10); “They believed in the L-rd and in Moshe, His servant” (Shemot 14:31).

Why this “and she said”? Because it is his mother, Yocheved, who says: you, you saved him from the water. Now water is mentioned from the creation, when the spirit of G-d hovered over the waters that covered everything. Water can drown everything, irrigate everything and make it grow again; erase all traces and give new life; serve as an immersion bath, not for the individual alone, but for the whole universe, as in the Flood.

Moshe thus remains with an undefined name. Reverse the letters of his name and you have HaShem, the Name. It is when the people has crossed the sea, crossed the waters, that it will believe in G-d and in Moshe: that is where it identifies him and gives him a name. Until then, there was no name.

For in exile one loses one's identity; we all live an exile from ourselves — geographical, in time, in the family, in our social circle. But we need it, like the seed in the soil: it is when it reaches its state of annihilation that it develops and produces abundantly.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Each person goes through his trial of exile, whether he likes it or not. The question is how one comes out of that exile.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

For a long time we are known by the name others have given us. By what name are we known at work, at school, in the family — and is it our own? What will we have to go through before we are called by the true one?

They Did Not Change Their Names



PRESENTATION

According to our Sages, the merit of the children of Israel in Egypt lies in two things: they did not change their names, they did not change their language. And yet, the Rav asserts, those who came up were not those who had gone down.

THE QUESTION

If the names are the same going down and coming up, what then has changed?

THE ANSWER

Our Sages: “They did not change their names, they did not change their language.”

Each name in the book of Bereshit is associated with a meaning and a destiny. Chavah names Kayin by giving his name a meaning; Hevel receives a name that tells his destiny; Yishmael, Esav, all the sons of Yaakov bear a name according to the mission and the attributes they must bring about around them. One does not choose a name because it sounds nice: one ties it to an emblematic figure, or to a meaning one wishes to perpetuate. To keep one's name is to keep one's identity and one's attachment.

And yet the Reuven and Shimon who came up from Egypt are not the ones who went down: they are the same names, with a coefficient a hundred, two hundred times greater. Another dimension.

It is as in a family, when the newborn child is given the name of a grandfather, of a loved one who has passed away: his body is in the dust, his soul lives on. Giving him that name is giving another dimension to the one who is no longer among us.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

That is how the generations move forward. One must give life; and for that, there is a loss of substance.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each of us bears a name that comes from someone. Let each person say from whom, and what he has made of it. Are we that same name, only greater — or smaller?

“He Went Out to His Brothers”



PRESENTATION

Moshe grew up in Pharaoh's palace. Once grown, he “went out to his brothers.” The Rav reports two readings of this word: for Ibn Ezra, it would refer to the Egyptians; for another commentator, to his Hebrew brothers.

THE QUESTION

On which side does Moshe take his stand — and why does a Hebrew deny him this choice the very next day?

THE ANSWER

“He went out to his brothers” (Shemot 2:11); “Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?” (Shemot 2:14).

Moshe was torn by the double identity he lived through his name: the one Pharaoh's daughter had given him, and the one his mother had given him. He goes out to find out which world he belongs to, what his real identity is. And he chooses to take the side of the persecuted.

But the next day, he intervenes in a fight between two Hebrews and says to the aggressor: why are you striking your brother? The other answers: do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian? In other words: if you want to stand in our camp, enter fully into our history, instead of playing referee between the Egyptian camp and the Jewish camp.

Moshe understands that he cannot yet count on his brothers' maturity, and he prefers to go into exile. He then marries the daughter of Yitro, priest of every idol, a “universal idolater.” For a descendant of the house of Levi, this is problematic — the Rav says only: I am reading the text. This marriage between the family of Avraham and the priests of the nations had to take place.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

If you want to stand in our camp, you must put yourself fully into our history, and not try to be the referee.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

It is comfortable to referee: it is a way of belonging nowhere. In what conflict around us have we played the judge to avoid taking sides? And whom have we not allowed to count us among his own?

Counted, Then Called



PRESENTATION

Rashi opens the book of Shemot by asking why the sons of Yaakov, already counted in their lifetime, are named again. His answer: because they are dear in G-d's eyes, and compared to the stars.

THE QUESTION

What difference does it make to be called by one's name rather than counted by one's number?

THE ANSWER

Rashi on Shemot 1:1: "Although He counted them by their names in their lifetime, He counts them again after their death, to make known how dear they are to Him"; "He brings out their host by number; He calls them all by name" (Yeshayahu 40:26).

The stars He brings out according to their number, according to their serial number; but when He must call them to gather them, it is not by the figure: it is by the name.

Now this is exactly Egypt's method, visible from the very first chapters: everything works without names. The text does not say that Amram separated from Yocheved so as not to have to cast their child into the water: it says "a man of the house of Levi" — an anonymous person, and a collective. Who are the Hebrew midwives? We are not told. And the people, who used to be called "the children of Israel," becomes "the people." Egypt's aim: to reduce a whole people to a serial number, to a figure.

That is why the text names the twelve sons of Yaakov one by one, in a family of seventy persons. Just as they went down with their names, so they will come up: with their names, with their language, with their power to communicate with beings and things.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is no longer a number; it is a name that takes its place.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

It is easier to be a number: it asks nothing of us. Where do we accept, without protest, to be counted rather than called? And who around us do we never call by name?

“Those Who Come” — in the Present



PRESENTATION

“These are the names of the children of Israel who come into Egypt.” The text says “who come,” in the present, though they arrived long ago and the parasha of Vayigash has already named them one by one.

THE QUESTION

Why does the text say they come, in the present, when they have already come?

THE ANSWER

“These are the names of the children of Israel who come (haba'im) into Egypt; with Yaakov, each man and his household, they came (ba'u)” (Shemot 1:1).

A midrash reads that these are the names of the children of Israel who go down into Egypt. What matters is not the persons, but each one's function, the mission to be fulfilled through his exile: a name borne in its raw state, which had to be developed.

So there are two comings. The first is a coming of exploration, timid, passive: one submits, one finds oneself in a situation one did not want, without knowing what to do — but one does not give up. The second is when one takes the situation upon oneself, fights to get out of it and to fulfill one's identity through one's mission. Chassidic language calls the first feminine, because it is in waiting, and the second masculine: there is assurance, a will to accomplish; one goes on the offensive.

Between the two will come dissolution, almost annihilation under the persecutions. As long as one has not planted one's seed in the soil where one has settled, there will be neither development, nor flourishing, nor resonance to the name one bears.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The question is to keep one's name, to keep one's identity fiercely.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There are situations we have lived in for years without ever taking them upon ourselves. Which one, for each of us? And what would change if we decided to truly come into it, instead of having been led there?

“Come to Pharaoh”



PRESENTATION

Further on in the story, G-d does not say to Moshe “go to Pharaoh,” but “come to Pharaoh.” The Rav pauses on this word. Already, before the descent, Yaakov had been told: I will go down with you into Egypt.

THE QUESTION

Why does G-d say “come to Pharaoh,” and not “go to Pharaoh”?

THE ANSWER

“Come to Pharaoh” (Shemot 10:1); “I will go down with you into Egypt, and I will also bring you up again” (Bereshit 46:4).

Some commentators say that Moshe was afraid to appear before Pharaoh again, after a first time from which he had gained nothing. But our Sages take another approach: “come to Pharaoh” means come with Me, accompany Me to Pharaoh. Know that wherever you go, I am with you, in every situation you find yourself in. Accompany Me — that is, be truly My associate, My partner in all that I undertake, and trust Me.

That is what had already been said to Yaakov: do not think I will abandon you when you find yourself in Egypt. You have a function to fulfill, even in this desert of the nations.

And that is just what we need. To find oneself in exile, to live through a family drama, to be disoriented: yes, one loses one's compass, one loses one's footing, one is on the point of losing one's faith. That is precisely when it is said not “go,” but “come.”

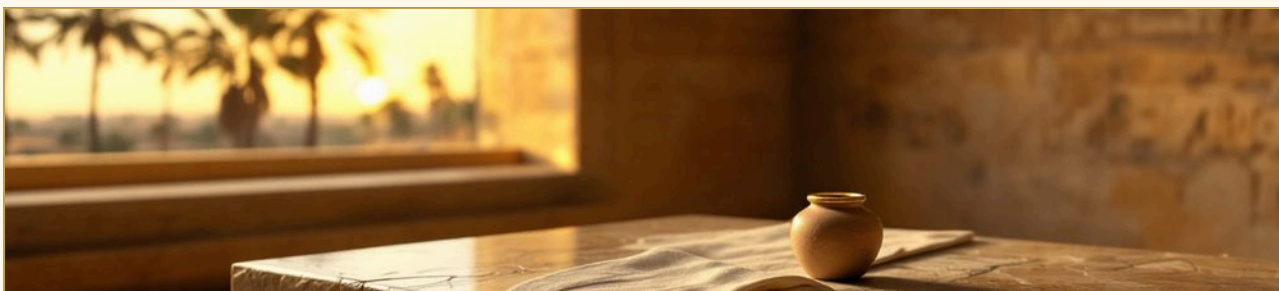
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Do not believe that you are abandoned to your fate, left to yourself. Know that I am at your side.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We often push open a door believing we must face it alone. Which one, this week? And to whom around us should we say not “go ahead,” but “come, I'm going with you”?

Tzafnat Paneach: A Name for Cover



PRESENTATION

The lecture showed that in Egypt the children of Israel did not change their names. But during the questions, the Rav points out an awkward fact: Yosef, for his part, received another name in Egypt, Tzafnat Paneach — and he apologized for it to his brothers.

THE QUESTION

Did Yosef deny his identity by accepting an Egyptian name — or did that name serve him as a cover?

THE ANSWER

“Pharaoh called Yosef by the name Tzafnat Paneach” (Bereshit 41:45).

Why did you abandon your name? asks the Rav, as one would ask one of our own who suddenly started going by an entirely different first name. Yosef changed his name, and he apologized for it to his brothers.

But the name itself says something else. Tzafnat comes from tzafun, hidden — like the hidden matzah, the tzafun of the Seder. Paneach means to develop, to decode. So there is a hidden meaning to be decoded through Yosef. Toward the Egyptians, he had to show that he had changed his name; in reality, he covered himself with a code.

A participant also objects that Yosef's wife was not an Egyptian: according to the midrash, she was Dinah's daughter, adopted by the priest of On. It matters little, answers the Rav: today she belongs to another culture, to another belief.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

In reality, he covered himself with a code; he borrowed a code.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We sometimes wear a name or a façade in order to live among others. Does this mask protect what is hidden within us, or does it end up replacing it? Who at this table would still know how to decode ours?