

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

TETZAVEH

12 Questions for the Shabbat Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Tetzaveh: Elevating the Self”: the Sanctuary is not first of all a
place of atonement, but a place where man rises. Why Moshe's
name disappears from it, why iron alone is excluded, and why the
Kohen must climb three steps to light a lamp at human height.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

Table of Topics

Themes for reflection and questions to share around the table for Parashat Tetzaveh

-
- | | |
|-----------|---|
| 01 | An Idea That Becomes a Dwelling |
| <hr/> | |
| 02 | What We Give Is What We Keep |
| <hr/> | |
| 03 | Everything Except Iron |
| <hr/> | |
| 04 | The Small Mountain, an Answer to Sinai |
| <hr/> | |
| 05 | The One Sacrifice a Stranger Could Not Offer |
| <hr/> | |
| 06 | Recipes for Spirituality |
| <hr/> | |
| 07 | A Missing Name |
| <hr/> | |
| 08 | The Altar Missing from the List |
| <hr/> | |
| 09 | A Third, a Quarter, a Fifth |
| <hr/> | |
| 10 | The Rich Could Not Give More |
| <hr/> | |
| 11 | The Princes Who Came Too Late |
| <hr/> | |
| 12 | Three Steps for a Lamp at Human Height |
| <hr/> | |

SUBJECT 01

An Idea That Becomes a Dwelling



PRESENTATION

With the Sanctuary, says the Rav, we reach the completion of the creation of the world. G-d gave man a universe; in return, man offers Him a small sanctuary. And this sanctuary has furniture: a table, a candelabrum, an ark.

THE QUESTION

Why is creation complete only when man makes G-d a dwelling here below — and what does our desire for a home of our own have to do with it?

THE ANSWER

“They shall make Me a sanctuary, and I will dwell among them” (Shemot 25:8).

As long as man has not felt the need to live with G-d in this spiritual intimacy, the Rav explains, the dwelling here below that the Creator desired at the very origin of creation is not realized. Without this descent into the world of reality, into the world of the tangible, the notion of G-d would have remained a pure idea, with no tie to the reality of the world.

Now we ourselves have a deep desire to have a home of our own, to fulfill ourselves in our small universe, in our intimacy, personal or family. And we are always fine-tuning the way we will furnish our inner life. This intimacy reaches a sublime level when we realize it with the infinite.

In the Sanctuary there is the table, the menorah, the ark — which is also the library. Above the ark is the image of a couple who remain attentive to the word of the absolute, the two constantly facing each other, each one within the other. That is what makes man's fulfillment, and what makes G-d content with His dwelling, because it answers His deepest aspirations.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Without this descent into the world here below, the notion of G-d would have remained a pure idea, with no tie to the reality of the world.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Everyone cares for his home in his own way. What makes our home more than a shelter: a table, a light, books? And as a couple, do we still know how to look at each other face to face, attentive to something greater than ourselves?

What We Give Is What We Keep



PRESENTATION

To build the Sanctuary, G-d asks neither for a tax nor a levy, but for a terumah. And the text does not say “you shall give”: it says “let them take for Me an offering.”

THE QUESTION

If the Sanctuary is not first of all a place where one wipes away one's sins, what exactly does one take there while thinking one is giving?

THE ANSWER

“Let them take for Me an offering; from every man whose heart moves him you shall take My offering” (Shemot 25:2).

The Sanctuary, says the Rav, is not a priori a place of sacrifice. It is not a place for scrubbing off the sins we commit, the mistakes we have made, for making up lost ground. It is first and foremost a makom, a place of self-elevation. That is why G-d, when He asks for a gift of oneself, speaks of terumah: terumah is hitromemut, elevation.

And in this elevation, one does not really give. All that we give is what we keep for ourselves, what we have invested for ourselves. That is our only lasting gain, because all the rest is lost. That is why the verse does not say “you shall give your gift” but “you shall take”: you will benefit from your investment.

There is a holiness in time, given to us through Shabbat: it is G-d who sanctified Shabbat; it is we who sanctify the festivals. There is a duty to sanctify the life of man: G-d offered its elements; it is up to us to realize it. And there is a holiness in space: the dwelling of our life, which each person imagines according to his own demands, but which one and the same spirit moves us to build.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

That is our only lasting gain, because all the rest is lost.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We often measure our gifts by what they cost us. Let each person say what he gave this year that in fact made him grow. Of all that we possess, what will never be lost?

Everything Except Iron



PRESENTATION

The Sanctuary is built with money earned outside, and it comes from every direction. Only one material is set aside. Iron may not even be brought near the stones of the altar to polish them.

THE QUESTION

Why this absolute refusal of iron, when no other metal, wherever it comes from, is excluded from the Sanctuary?

THE ANSWER

“If you make Me an altar of stones, do not build it of hewn stones, for by lifting up your iron upon it you have profaned it” (Shemot 20:22); the statue in Daniel’s dream (Daniel 2:32–33).

This intimacy with G-d, the Rav explains, we would like to be exclusive; yet we achieve it with money earned outside. It may come from the Egyptian world, from the gold and silver of Egypt, from Persian culture, from Greek culture. All these peoples can contribute to building the Sanctuary. We reject no one.

Only one is excluded. In Daniel’s dream, four powers appear through a statue: a head of gold, a chest of silver, hips of bronze, feet of clay. What could be brought to the Temple was the gold of Babel, the silver of Persia, the copper of Greece. But steel — hardly any.

One could not even bring a sword or an axe near to polish the stones of the Temple. For weapons were made of that material, and the Temple represented precisely all that could embody serenity and the joy of living.

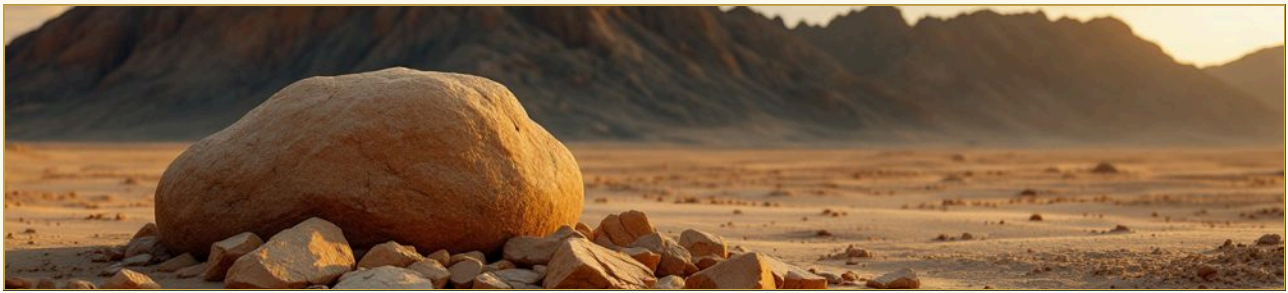
THE RAV’S CONCLUSION

The Temple represented precisely all that could embody serenity and the joy of living.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We gladly welcome what comes from elsewhere when it enriches us. But what “iron” do we let into the house: a word that wounds, a quarrel, a weapon hidden beneath the conversation? What would we have to set aside for our table to embody serenity?

The Small Mountain, an Answer to Sinai



PRESENTATION

In Daniel's dream, a stone strikes the statue's feet of clay — Rome, say our Sages. The whole statue collapses, and the stone becomes a mountain. In this mountain the Rav sees an answer.

THE QUESTION

What does the mountain born of the stone answer — and why could foreign workers build Shlomo's Temple?

THE ANSWER

“A stone was cut out, without hands, and struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them” (Daniel 2:34).

This small mountain, says the Rav, is the answer to the word Sinai: the answer that man brings to the Torah. The Torah was given through ten commandments that can break up into seventy languages, seventy flames, those of the nations included. Once all the scraps, all the debris, all the scrap iron are cleared away, once things are presented in their purity, there is a meeting between the contribution of humanity as a whole and that of the Jewish people in particular. It is the meeting of all these elements together that forms the answer to G-d's revelation to the world.

So there is always a movement of exchange between the Creator and the created. That is why, when Shlomo built the Temple, he brought workers from Lebanon, men foreign to the whole of Jewish tradition and spirituality: they could take part in building the Sanctuary without any problem.

The elements can be imported from everywhere, because there is no exclusivity.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

There is always a movement of exchange taking place between the Creator and the created.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We sometimes believe that truth can come only from our own side. What good thing have we learned from a person very different from us? And how do we sort, in what the world brings us, the scrap iron from what can serve to build?

SUBJECT 05

The One Sacrifice a Stranger Could Not Offer



PRESENTATION

The sanctuary of Israel was not reserved for Israel: a non-Jew could offer a burnt offering there. Only one sacrifice remained closed to him, the shelamim, the one that is shared.

THE QUESTION

What must one have understood to be able to eat before G-d — and why did the pagan world not manage it?

THE ANSWER

The shelamim offering: one part on the altar, one part to the Kohen, one part eaten by those who offer it.

Just as creation is offered to all of humanity, says the Rav, the sanctuary the Jewish people builds is not the exclusive place of its own divine service: it belongs to all humanity. That is why a non-Jew could offer a burnt offering inside the Temple.

The only sacrifice he could not offer was the shelamim. It is a sacrifice that is shared: one part goes on the altar, one part is given to the Kohen, and one part the owners of the sacrifice eat within the sacred precinct. Imagine being able to eat before G-d, to share the meal in His presence! As long as the pagan world has not made its own the will to sanctify matter and space, it cannot bring this offering of peace with the divine, this shared intimacy.

Belonging to the Jewish faith is therefore not what tears us away from the rest of the world or from the world of matter, to propel us into the sphere of heavenly ideas. The world of ideas alone is of no use to us. Jewish life loves to see the house we live in as a small sanctuary, where the table is an object of sanctification. But this must be an impulse of the heart: one does not impose a faith.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Imagine being able to eat before G-d, to share the meal in His presence.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Are our Shabbat meals shared in G-d's presence, or just good meals? What could we add to our table — a word of Torah, a blessing said together, a guest — so that it becomes a small altar?

Recipes for Spirituality



PRESENTATION

Each as he feels it, each as he lives it: that is the ideal of the impulse of the heart. Only, the Rav warns, there is a risk. The people who had just experienced the revelation were so elevated that they no longer wanted to hear of this world. Forty days later, they were dancing around a golden calf.

THE QUESTION

How can a very lofty spirituality lead to the golden calf — and what distinguishes a living spiritual life from a recipe?

THE ANSWER

After Terumah, the parasha of the impulse of the heart, comes Tetzaveh, the parasha of order.

The risk, says the Rav, is that we fall back into certain fantasies that go beyond fiction and that sometimes even affect the moral order. After the revelation at Sinai, the people were at such a level that their attachment to G-d expressed itself in aspirations to the heavenly spheres. We still see this today.

Yet one must beware of this spirituality that tears you away from the world here below and lets you be seduced by the world of the unknown. It is what leads to the golden calf. For when one wants to return to reality, instead of serving G-d, one serves recipes for spirituality like cooking recipes. They become closed circuits, finished, turning back on themselves, with nothing new, no elevation, no renewal. And that is not Judaism.

Judaism means that, just as G-d renews His creation every day, it is up to us to review our spirituality every day, to enrich it with our experience and to give it fresh momentum as life's trials come.

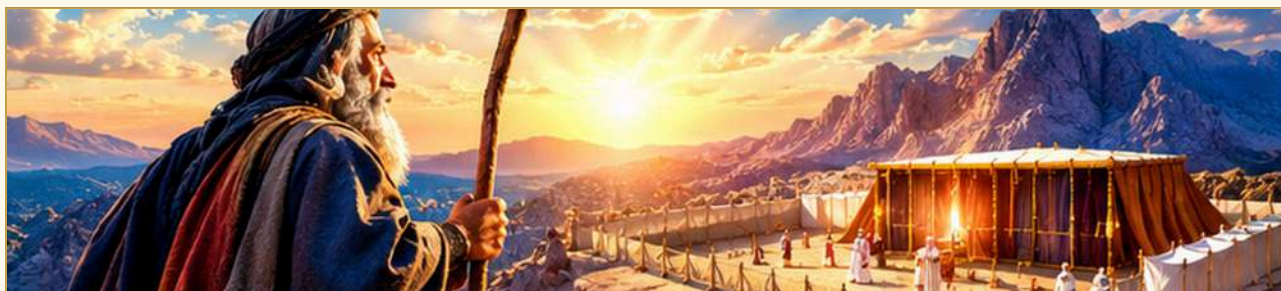
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Instead of serving G-d, we serve recipes for spirituality like cooking recipes.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We all have our religious habits, our repeated gestures. Which one do we perform like a recipe, without thinking about it anymore? And what did we learn this year, in a trial, that could renew the way we pray or study?

A Missing Name



PRESENTATION

The Sanctuary takes up two parashiot. In Terumah, Moshe's name recurs constantly. In Tetzaveh, it does not appear even once: Aharon takes up all the room.

THE QUESTION

Why does Moshe's name fade away just as we pass from the design of the Sanctuary to its actual setting up?

THE ANSWER

“And you shall command (tetzaveh) the children of Israel” (Shemot 27:20); “so that he will command (yetzaveh) his children and his household after him” (Bereshit 18:19).

Terumah is the impulse of the heart, where there is no separation between the word of G-d and the man who cleaves to it: that is Moshe. Everything in him is spirit. His tendency is to stay forty days and forty nights on the mountain without eating or drinking, nourished by the law and by the joy of his discoveries. But those forty days are the limit of viability of such a way of life: there is the golden calf, and Moshe is forced to come down to save the people.

At that moment, it is no longer Moshe who takes command. He oversees, but the central figure is Aharon, the Kohen. Aharon is driven by love of the people; he seeks to bring closer to Moshe's path those who stayed at the foot of Sinai and could not absorb all the teaching. His sons will inherit his priesthood and the duty to educate the people.

From now on, one no longer lives on the impulse of the heart: what counts are the commandments. Tetzaveh means to bind, and yetzaveh means to educate. We find it with Avraham, so that he would instruct his children after him.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Tetzaveh means to bind; yetzaveh means to educate.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We love impulses and are wary of rules. Let each person name something begun with enthusiasm and dropped for lack of discipline. And who in our family needs an Aharon to accompany him rather than a Moshe to show him the summit?

The Altar Missing from the List



PRESENTATION

Terumah lists everything needed to build the Sanctuary. Only one item is missing from the list: the altar of incense. It appears only in Tetzaveh. And the incense burned on it contains an ingredient with a foul smell.

THE QUESTION

Why does the altar of incense appear only with Tetzaveh — and why is the incense invalid without its foul-smelling ingredient?

THE ANSWER

“Take spices: nataf, shechelet and chelbenah” (Shemot 30:34); our Sages: the chelbenah, with its bad smell, is counted among the spices (Keritot 6b).

Originally, says the Rav, the design of the Sanctuary did not include the notion of an atoning sacrifice. Its first element appears right after the revelation: an altar of stones, without iron to polish them, without any investment of gold and silver, and without exposing one's nakedness by climbing steps. The Sanctuary was not to become a way of displaying oneself in public and showing how one asserts oneself over others. It was simply an altar, not an instrument of atonement.

But the altar of incense, the one missing from Terumah, is the one where an impure, foul-smelling element had at all costs to be included, symbolizing the sinner and embodying evil. It had to be joined to the others: there were eleven elements, and if the chelbenah was missing, the whole was invalid. It is there that atonement for the sins of the children of Israel comes into play.

This is the new dimension of Tetzaveh, suited to man conditioned by laws coming from outside, to which he must submit.

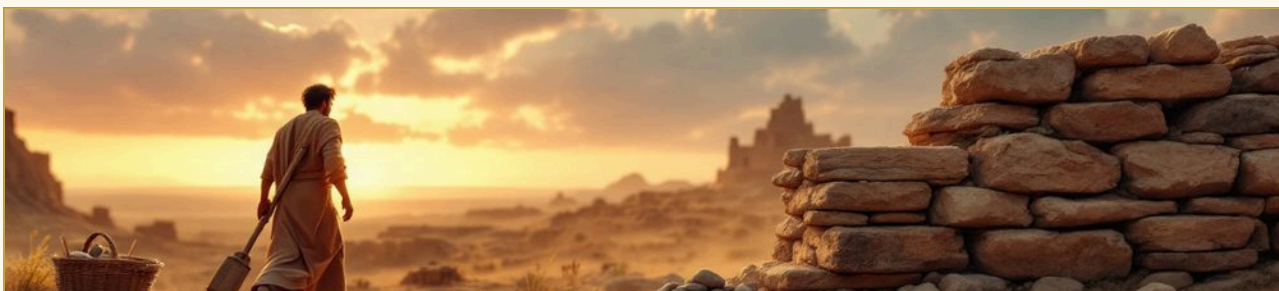
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

If ever the chelbenah was missing, the whole was invalid.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We gladly dream of groups with no one who bothers us. Who in our circle plays the role of the chelbenah — the one we would like to push aside? What would become of our family, our community, without him?

A Third, a Quarter, a Fifth



PRESENTATION

The man given laws from outside will not always measure up to them. There will be lapses, there will be negligence. Tetzaveh provides the means of making up for them. But the Rav goes further: he redefines what counts in a spiritual life.

THE QUESTION

If we almost never finish what we undertake, what truly counts in the spiritual life?

THE ANSWER

“The altar of incense... Aharon shall make atonement on its horns once a year” (Shemot 30:10).

There are ways of making up for our failings, says the Rav, so as not to sink into despair and not to abandon what we have undertaken. For what is important in the spiritual life is not what one has done, not the task one has finished. One has never finished it: sometimes for lack of time, sometimes for lack of means.

What is important is not the act one has finished, that one has accomplished. It is the determination with which one did things. One did a third, one did a quarter, one did a fifth: it does not matter.

The essential thing is that one committed oneself, that one invested oneself in this spiritual undertaking. It will bear its fruit. The children will continue it, the disciples will continue it, the friends will continue it. That, in sum, is what matters in the Sanctuary.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

One did a third, one did a quarter, one did a fifth — it does not matter. The essential thing is that one committed oneself.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We sometimes abandon a project because we will not be able to finish it. What study, what mitzvah, what good habit have we dropped for that reason? And who around us could continue what we will have begun?

The Rich Could Not Give More



PRESENTATION

Three contributions built the Sanctuary and kept it running. The first was free, according to the impulse of the heart. The other two were exactly half a shekel: the rich could not give more, and the poor could not give less.

THE QUESTION

Why half a shekel and not a whole one — and what does this half demand of us toward the one who is not like us?

THE ANSWER

“The rich shall not give more and the poor shall not give less than the half-shekel” (Shemot 30:15); “You shall love your fellow as yourself” (Vayikra 19:18).

The first contribution was free, the Rav explains. The second related to the sockets, the adanim, the foundations of the Sanctuary: the half-shekel had to be brought. The third was for its running, for the sacrifices: there too, a half-shekel. No one could say he had given more than another; in this building, everyone stood on an equal footing.

The half-shekel expresses the complementarity of man toward his fellow. For the re'a, the fellow, is the one who is different from me. If I get along with someone with whom I share exactly all my tastes and all my feelings, I have only sought another self to reinforce my ego: we are never two, we are always one. The re'a is the one I must get along with, the one who will complete me.

And the one who is different from me in essence is my Creator. To love one's fellow as oneself is to love what is different from oneself. There is here a shared reading between love of one's fellow, love of G-d and love of one's spouse: the one who is, by definition, different from you is your wife.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The re'a is the one who is different. He is the one I must get along with, the one who will complete me.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We readily choose our friends in our own image. Who around us irritates us by being different — and what could he give us that none of those like us ever will? As a couple, do we know how to love the other precisely because he or she is not us?

SUBJECT 11

The Princes Who Came Too Late



PRESENTATION

The tribal leaders had calculated: let the people give; they will not manage, and we will make up the rest. After two days, the people had given more than was needed. Nothing was left for them. Yet it is they who will bring the oil.

THE QUESTION

What did the princes lose by waiting to make up for others' shortfall — and why were they nonetheless left the oil?

THE ANSWER

“And the princes brought the shoham stones... and the oil for the lighting and for the anointing” (Shemot 35:27–28); Rashi: the word nesi'im is written there without a yod.

These leaders, says the Rav, had shown a certain arrogance toward the people at the time of the collection. Yet after two days the people had given more than was needed, and when the princes wanted to bring their contribution, nothing was left for them: it was not needed. So the text took a yod away from them. They could bring only the precious stones the Kohen wore on his breastplate, the breastplate of judgment, through which he made the whole people of Israel take part in the atonement of its sins.

There they learned their lesson: in the spiritual life, no contempt may be shown toward the people. Everyone could contribute according to his measure, and even more than a prince could bring.

Yet they were left one favor. These princes were chachamim, men steeped in great learning, who had distinguished themselves not by their wealth but by their knowledge. So it was they who brought the anointing oil and the oil for the menorah for the inauguration of the Sanctuary. For what was important in the Sanctuary was the knowledge that emerged from the service performed.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

In the spiritual life, no contempt may be shown toward the people.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

It is tempting to save ourselves for the big occasions, telling ourselves that without us nothing will get done. Where did we wait instead of acting at once? And what “oil” — a knowledge, a skill — can we bring this very week?

SUBJECT 12

Three Steps for a Lamp at Human Height



PRESENTATION

The menorah was on a human scale: the Kohen had only to stretch out his hand. Yet he had to climb onto a stone with three steps and lean down to light it. And the menorah was the only inequality in the Sanctuary.

THE QUESTION

Why are the lights of the menorah turned toward the center — and why did the Kohen have to climb up to light what was within his reach?

THE ANSWER

“The seven lamps shall give light toward the face of the menorah” (Bamidbar 8:2); “a stone before the menorah, with three steps” (Mishnah Tamid 3:9).

Where the half-shekel imposed equality, says the Rav, inequality lay in the menorah. Its seven branches represented the seven days of creation and the seven sciences that make up the sum of knowledge of the world. But the six branches, three on one side and three on the other, directed their lights toward the central light, that of Shabbat. Everything is oriented toward this axis: it is the science of Shabbat that kindles all the other sciences.

What was important in the Sanctuary was the knowledge that emerged from the service performed. Its basis lay in the tablets of the law, inside the ark; but the essential thing was the interpretation of the Oral Law, carried out by the men who had studied the law in depth and were charged with it, its protection and its preservation: the Kohanim.

That is why the Kohen lit the menorah with a sense of humility. It was on a human scale; he had only to stretch out his hand. But no: he had to climb a three-step stool to lean down and light it. And the menorah stood at the entrance to the Holy of Holies: it embodied the people's doorway into the Sanctuary.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It was in a state of humility that one could truly innovate in the law, without going beyond its limits.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

It is easy to settle a question simply by stretching out a hand. When did we give an opinion without taking the trouble to climb up, then lean down? And toward what central light are our various talents turned?