

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

TOLEDOT

12 Questions for the Shabbat Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Toledot: The Two Feuding Brothers”: why true history begins
with the union of Yitzchak and Rivkah, why it is harder to be a
righteous son of a righteous father, and why marriage is the
starting point of love. Leading up to the two feuding brothers,
Yishmael and Esav, whose reconciliation is prepared first within
us.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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

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Why these engenderings?



PRESENTATION

The word toledot, “engenderings,” already opens the account of heaven and earth, and then that of Noah. Yet no parasha bore this name. We had to wait for the one that follows the union of Yitzchak and Rivkah.

THE QUESTION

What begins with Yitzchak and Rivkah that had not begun with Noah?

THE ANSWER

“These are the engenderings of Noah: Noah...” (Bereshit 6:9); “These are the engenderings of Yitzchak son of Avraham” (Bereshit 25:19).

The reason is very simple, says the Rav: true engenderings mean that history does not repeat itself. History is not a mere succession of events; it moves forward, mutations take place within it. These are the engenderings of Noah — Noah: he engendered only his own person. There, history merely repeats itself.

These mutations began with the union of Yitzchak and Rivkah. This event must not be minimized, nor taken for a drop of water in the ocean: that is where history started, and this couple remains the model of the first union.

The perfect engenderings are those of the beginning, those of heaven and earth: projects, as the Creator conceived them. As soon as man sets out to bring this history to its completion, it becomes limping, unsteady. For the moment, we are in gestation; but at the end of every effort, there is a reward.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

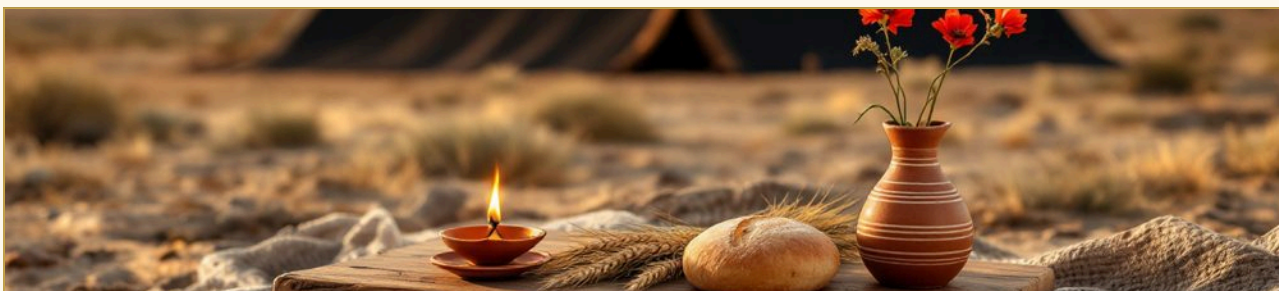
History is not simply a succession of events. No — history moves forward.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Many families faithfully pass down the same habits and engender nothing. What has each of us added to what he received? And what do we repeat at this table only because it has always been done that way?

SUBJECT 02

Three wives, three forces of history



PRESENTATION

Avraham and Sarah seem the ideal couple. Yet, says the Rav, their home is not the model of the first union. Avraham also had Hagar, then Keturah, and a midrash links each of his wives to one of the sons of Noach.

THE QUESTION

Why is the home of Avraham and Sarah not the model of union, while that of Yitzchak and Rivkah is?

THE ANSWER

The Rav quotes a midrash: Avraham married a descendant of each of Noach's three sons.

Avraham and Sarah remained within the cocoon of a very close family: Sarah was the daughter of Haran, Avraham's brother. They shared the same culture and the same convictions, and both were carried by the attribute of chesed, kindness.

But Avraham also had a maidservant, Hagar, and then a wife named Keturah. According to this midrash, Sarah descended from Shem, Hagar from Cham, Keturah from Yefet. Now these three sons of Noach represent the three generative forces of history: Shem, entirely spiritual; Cham, entirely material; Yefet, turned toward art, forms, the beauty of things. Avraham wanted to fuse them into one whole rather than leave them apart.

None of this, the Rav stresses, is retained in the union of Yitzchak and Rivkah. Another model begins with them.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

None of this is retained in the union of Yitzchak and Rivkah.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In our family, who carries mostly the spiritual, who the material, who the love of beauty? Do we know how to hold these three forces together, or does each stay in his own corner? And is a couple better built between people who are alike, or between people from different worlds?

Righteous, son of the righteous



PRESENTATION

At forty, Yitzchak reaches a high spiritual level. He has gone through a sublime trial, and life beside his father was surely not easy. Our Sages distinguish the tzaddik ben tzaddik, the righteous son of a righteous man, from the tzaddik ben rasha, the righteous son of a wicked one.

THE QUESTION

Why is it harder to be a righteous son of a righteous man — and how does one move forward without repudiating one's father?

THE ANSWER

“Tzaddik ben tzaddik” and “tzaddik ben rasha.”

It is much harder to be a righteous son of a righteous man, says the Rav. As the son of a wicked man, you make a revolution within the family, you take the opposite side and found another direction of thought: that is relatively easy. But when you are a righteous son of a righteous man, you are not going to call your father or your grandfather into question. How then do you move forward?

For if Yitzchak merely continues, repeats or copies his father's path, history does not advance: we remain in the situation of the engenderings of Noach.

Yitzchak therefore stands in a perspective entirely different from his father's. He is the man of rigor, the man of fairness. To confine oneself to the path of Avraham would have been to take only one aspect of things.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

He is another righteous man, but an indispensable one.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

It is easier to break with one's parents than to extend them without copying them. Let each person say how he differs from his father or mother without repudiating them. And what aspect that they did not take up might we have to bring?

SUBJECT 04

Two feuding brothers to reunite



PRESENTATION

Avraham's attribute of kindness was carried to the extreme in Yishmael; Esav, for his part, took the path of pure reason and logic. Two poles, one or the other of which our exiles embraced: East and West.

THE QUESTION

If the war between the two brothers is one day to end, where is the battle fought first?

THE ANSWER

Kibbutz galuyot, the ingathering of the exiles.

Each pole ends up claiming what it did not receive, the Rav observes. Those who inherited Avraham's kindness aspire to justice, to *din*, to the point of waging wars in its name; those who inherited pure logic become the apostles of love. Each holds a piece that is not his own.

The Jewish people carries both poles within itself: some lived their exile alongside Esav, others alongside Yishmael. These are the two fundamental tendencies within the people, and the ingathering of the exiles is first of all their ingathering.

And here we must be on our guard. If we do not recognize ourselves through what we brought back from each of them, if we do not unite these two heritages within us, the war between Yishmael and Esav will go on. It is up to us to fuse these identities.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

But we — we need to bring them together.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We sometimes perpetuate among ourselves divisions we inherited and did not choose. What have we received, without knowing it, from the country where our family lived its exile? And what might we learn from those whose exile was different from ours?

The crucible of Egypt



PRESENTATION

Why did the people have to pass through Egypt? The Rav sees it as the crucible in which identities are fused. But he also recalls the price of that passage: only one-fifth of the people came out.

THE QUESTION

Why were Hebrews faithful to the traditions of their fathers not ready to leave Egypt?

THE ANSWER

Our Sages: only one-fifth of the people left Egypt (Rashi on Shemot 13:18).

We passed through Egypt, says the Rav, as through the crucible of humanity, to fuse the different identities within us and carry them away with us. But we left many losses behind: four-fifths of the people perished in Egypt. Only the fifth that had prepared for it came out.

When Moshe came to announce the exodus, the people did not recognize him: they were not preparing for it. They felt Jewish, they followed the traditions of the fathers, they had preserved them. But it was only tradition. Put to the test, they were unable to respond and to show that they were ready to sacrifice everything for the convictions they professed.

Yet what is at stake in history is to bring about the ben Adam, the son of Adam: the one who carries within him the values of his identity, made in the image of G-d, and who is able, every day, to knead it, to work on it.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is true that they followed the traditions of the fathers, that they had preserved them — but it was tradition.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Does a tradition kept out of habit hold firm on the day of trial? Which mitzvah do we do only because it has always been done, and which would we be ready to defend? How do we prepare for that, and how do we prepare our children?

Love begins after marriage



PRESENTATION

Yitzchak is forty when he marries Rivkah, and the age gap between them is considerable. She comes from an idolatrous world: the daughter of Betuel, the sister of Lavan. Yet it is about this couple that the Torah uses, for the first time, the word love between a man and a woman.

THE QUESTION

Why is the Torah's first married love also the one that seemed least likely?

THE ANSWER

“He took Rivkah, she became his wife, and he loved her” (Bereshit 24:67).

Some masters advised against marrying too early: a premature union risks being driven by desire and the pleasure of intimacy more than by the aspiration to build the house of Israel. Before Yitzchak and Rivkah, the expression of love did not exist, because desire prevailed over love and over spiritual aspiration.

Rivkah tore herself away from a dishonest world; our Sages compare her to a rose among thorns. For the first time she sees a man wholly given to prayer, and she measures what separates them. She remains full of admiration for him — which does not mean an absence of love: Avimelech will later come upon them. What is good in the intimacy of a bedroom is not displayed in public.

The text says “he loved her” only after the marriage. And it is the only union with neither concubine, nor maidservant, nor second wife: that is why the Torah, which elsewhere is content with an allusion, spreads it over two chapters.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

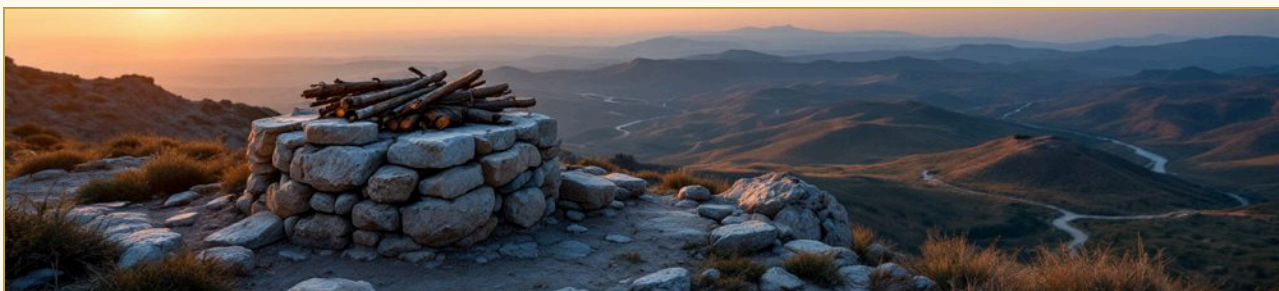
Marriage is not the culmination of love, but its starting point.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We think love is proven before, and preserved after. What, in our marriage, truly began after the wedding? And what did we stop building the day we believed we had arrived?

SUBJECT 07

The man who came back from Mount Moriah



PRESENTATION

After the Akedah, the text says that Avraham returned to his servants; Yitzchak is not mentioned. There are many explanations. The Rav keeps one that he “likes very much,” and which sheds light on the place Rivkah will take in the couple.

THE QUESTION

What becomes of someone who has seen something extraordinary — and who then carries the destiny of the house?

THE ANSWER

“Avraham returned to his servants” (Bereshit 22:19).

Yitzchak, says the Rav, was so shaken by the trial of the Akedah that he was as if in another world. He did not even dare to speak of it.

The Rav draws a comparison, while specifying that it belongs to an entirely opposite register: those who went through the camps and no longer dared to speak of it. It had marked them so deeply that one had to wait a long time to gather a few testimonies from their lips.

The union of Yitzchak and Rivkah was pure in itself. But it is not Yitzchak who steers it: it is Rivkah who leads, who takes the destiny of the people in hand. She is the one who will carry it, and she will succeed.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

He did not even dare to speak of it; he had seen something extraordinary.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In families there are silences that are not indifference. Do we know someone who does not speak of what he went through? How can we surround him without forcing him? And who takes over when one of us can no longer carry the house?

SUBJECT 08

Three things returned to the tent



PRESENTATION

Yitzchak brings Rivkah into the tent of his mother Sarah. Our Sages say that three signs, extinguished since Sarah's death, returned there. For the Rav, these are not miracles to admire, but three demands.

THE QUESTION

What are these three signs, and why are they the test of a home?

THE ANSWER

Rashi on Bereshit 24:67: the Shabbat light, the blessing in the dough, the cloud above the tent.

The first is the Shabbat lamp, which stayed lit: illuminating the home with the spirituality of Shabbat.

The second is the blessing on the portion taken from the dough: making sure the house is not a closed house but an open one; raising one's bread to the point of sharing it with the Kohen, serving spiritual causes before even enjoying it oneself.

The third is the cloud, the Divine Presence hovering over the tent: the purity of the couple's intimacy. Making sure it does not slide into vulgarity, so that even in intimacy one keeps one's spiritual values. When Yitzchak sees this, says the Rav, she is truly his wife: these are the criteria.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Making sure one's house is not a closed house, but an open one.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Of these three signs, which one grew weaker in our home this year: the light, the sharing, or the modesty? Let each answer honestly. And what would it take to rekindle it before next Shabbat?

SUBJECT 09

Incense smells sweet only with eleven



PRESENTATION

Before the engenderings of Yitzchak, the text notes that Avraham took a wife named Keturah. Many commentators recognize her as Hagar, returning under another name.

THE QUESTION

Why change one's name in order to return — and what does this name say about those who return?

THE ANSWER

“Avraham took another wife, named Keturah” (Bereshit 25:1); Rashi: this is Hagar.

Even today, when one wishes to change someone's destiny, a sick person for instance, one adds a name: it is no longer the same person; she wears another garment, lives another dimension of life. That is also why a candidate for conversion changes his name. Hagar was a king's daughter; she aspired to be a maidservant in the house of Avraham, she nearly returned to her origins, and then she witnessed the providence that saved her child.

Keturah comes from ketoret, incense. Among its eleven ingredients was the chelbenah which, burned alone, gave off an unbearable odor. But mixed with the others, it was the one that — as salt gives a dish its flavor — awakened the fragrance of the whole.

Keturah's integration is positive in this: every Hagar is a Keturah in potential.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

She did indeed show the way of return, of repentance.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We all know someone, in the family or the community, of whom it is said that he “smells bad” on his own. What do we do so that he is part of the blend rather than set apart? And within what whole does each of us need to be included in order to give the best of himself?

SUBJECT 10

Gifts that were not money



PRESENTATION

Avraham had other children, born of his pilagshim, his concubines. The text says that he gave them gifts before sending them eastward, away from Yitzchak. It was not a matter of money.

THE QUESTION

What does one give to those one acknowledges but cannot keep close?

THE ANSWER

“To the sons of the concubines... Avraham gave gifts, and he sent them away from Yitzchak his son... eastward” (Bereshit 25:6).

In the word pilegesh, our grammarians note the word peleg, a part: the relationship is not whole; it answers a need, an accident along the way. The same is true in the forging of Jewish identity. There are many believers in humanity, several tendencies, and they certainly have their value.

These gifts are names, messages: lines of thought, very limited spiritual paths. Now a single spiritual path, held on its own, can give rise to magical beliefs of every kind. One needs the luminous beam of all the values the Torah carries — the Torah which, though divided into mitzvot, is preserved as a unity to which nothing may be added and from which nothing may be taken away.

Many scientific or philosophical currents are very convincing, very seductive. That does not make them the values of the Torah.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Avraham recognizes them, but they must not live together with Yitzchak.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We often confuse respect with mixing. What seductive idea, received from elsewhere, have we installed in our home without examining it? And what do we have that is so precious to transmit that we refuse to dilute it?

SUBJECT 11

Why did Avraham not bless his son?



PRESENTATION

Avraham dies “old and satisfied”; Yitzchak and Yishmael bury him together. But he did not bless Yitzchak in his lifetime. It is G-d who, after his death, blesses Yitzchak.

THE QUESTION

Why does a father give up blessing the one he has chosen?

THE ANSWER

“After the death of Avraham, Elokim blessed Yitzchak his son; and Yitzchak settled near Be'er Lachai Ro'i” (Bereshit 25:11).

After death comes the problem of succession. Avraham did not want to decide, and did not want to bless Yitzchak in his lifetime, for fear that Yishmael would take it very badly and that his hatred toward his brother would be fed by that frustration. So G-d takes over, and Yitzchak will later pass this blessing on to Yaakov.

One must measure what Avraham takes with him. For Sarah, the text spoke of the years of her life; for him, “advanced in days”: he did not merely carry his years, he carried his days, each one counts. He leaves this world honored, recognized by all his children and by all the movements that came from him.

As for Yitzchak, he settles near the well of the One who sees. A providence that constantly sees us can be neither ignored nor evaded.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is G-d who takes over. It is G-d who gives the blessing to Yitzchak.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We readily decide between our children, and we call it clarity. What have we said or given to one of them, in front of the other, that may have wounded him? And what would we be ready to give up so as not to feed a grudge between them?

SUBJECT 12

Twelve princes before twelve tribes



PRESENTATION

The parasha lists the engenderings of Yishmael: twelve princes, even before the twelve tribes of Israel. Avraham had prayed for this son: “If only Yishmael might live before You!” The Rav draws from it a lesson on the place of this branch in history.

THE QUESTION

What should be done with a branch set aside from the line: forget it, or wait for it to complete its own path?

THE ANSWER

“If only Yishmael might live before You!” (Bereshit 17:18); “twelve princes according to their nations” (Bereshit 25:16).

Yishmael too, says the Rav, took in these values, this recognition, at the end of his epic: our Sages note that he did teshuvah and died a gentle death, surrounded by those who had supported him. He cannot be eradicated, he cannot be ignored, he cannot be cast to the margins of history.

His twelve princes are brought into the world before the twelve tribes. For the moment, nothing emerges from them yet: these engenderings resemble Hagar the Egyptian more than Yishmael, the son of Avraham.

Yet these are indispensable mutations, for we live these gestations from within. When we have carried them through, the fruit will be seen outside: in the end of Yishmael's open aggression toward Yitzchak, and of Esav's toward Yaakov.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is history moving forward, one way or another, with its ups and downs.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There is often a branch of the family that was set aside or that drifted away. Do we speak of it as a page that has been turned? What could we do, within our own home, so that one day anger between brothers gives way?