

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

VAERA

12 Questions for the Shabbat Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Vaera: The Why of Suffering”: Moshe dares to ask why his
people suffers, and G-d answers by speaking of the fathers who
never asked anything, of the husk that protects the fruit, of
freedom and of inheritance.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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SUBJECT 01

“Why have You dealt harshly with this people?”



PRESENTATION

Moshe went before Pharaoh in G-d's name. The result: the labor has doubled, and the elite Pharaoh placed at the head of the people turns against him: stop talking about liberation. Moshe then comes back to G-d with the question of why there is suffering.

THE QUESTION

Why does G-d, asked about His people's suffering, begin by speaking of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov?

THE ANSWER

“Why have You dealt harshly with this people? Why then did You send me?” (Shemot 5:22).

The answer begins with a reproach: this attitude is not to your credit. I revealed Myself to the patriarchs, and at no point did they question Me. I had promised them the land; yet Avraham had to pay dearly for a piece of ground to bury his wife, Yitzchak had to fight over wells to water his fields, Yaakov had to buy the ground on which to pitch his tents in order to have a right to the soil. Each time the promise, each time the purchase — and never a question.

Their faith came from a premonition: an attachment to G-d through essence rather than through the mind. This still happens to us today: when we hold to the tradition of our fathers, it is mostly emotional. We continue what they taught us, but we do not try to go deeper; we do not try to know.

And G-d says: I respect that. But the ideal remains knowledge. That is what the following verses announce: “and you shall know that I am the L-rd.”

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Look — the purpose is vida'tem: you shall know.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Our fathers held firm without asking questions; we ask questions without always holding firm. Let each person name a practice he observes only because it comes from his parents. Which one would deserve, this year, that we take the time to understand it?

“By My name I did not make Myself known to them”



PRESENTATION

Before the plagues, the story breaks off for a strange declaration: G-d revealed Himself to the patriarchs as El Shaddai, but His name He did not make known to them. Moshe, for his part, wants to probe G-d's intention. The Rav shows that this request is welcomed — with a limit.

THE QUESTION

What does it mean to “know” G-d rather than to sense Him — and why can this knowledge never be complete?

THE ANSWER

“I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchak and to Yaakov as El Shaddai, but by My name, the L-rd, I did not make Myself known to them” (Shemot 6:3).

The patriarchs sensed: through creation they sensed the existence of G-d, and that was enough for them. From now on, G-d will reveal Himself to the children of Israel in such a way that they will seek to know Him. It will no longer be merely a feeling of His existence, which crumbles and decays with time: they will integrate it at the level of their mind.

But, G-d says to Moshe, you want to know My ways; know that there is a limit to the human mind, things you will not be able to decode. For from the moment you claimed to know G-d, it would mean that you master Him, that you yourself dominate Him.

What remains is the sense of belonging to a higher order, a supreme order. That is what makes man, and always will make him, a partner of G-d.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

A G-d you master through your knowledge is no longer G-d.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There is a difference between sensing and knowing, and many stop at the first. In what part of our Jewish life have we remained at the level of feeling for lack of wanting to learn? And where do we demand a complete explanation, when we ought to accept not decoding everything?

SUBJECT 03

Why is it Shaddai that is written on our doors?



PRESENTATION

On the mezuzah, at the entrance to our homes, it is the name Shaddai that appears, not the name of the L-rd. The name of limit, says the Rav, and not that of being.

THE QUESTION

Why is the name we place at the threshold of our homes the one that speaks of limit, and not the one that speaks of being?

THE ANSWER

“I am El Shaddai: it is I who said to the world: enough (dai)!” (Talmud, Chagigah 12a).

Shaddai is the One who set limits to the expansion of His creation, to the infinity of His creation. And in so doing, He invites those who believe in Him not to scatter themselves in space, not to try to contain Him in space: it is He who contains space. What He asks is to be grasped in time — in the time He shares with us, in our very existence.

So the knowledge of the L-rd will be more an inner knowledge than an outer one. Whoever wishes to approach the knowledge of being must know that it dwells in his own innermost depths.

The mezuzah at the door thus tells us: careful, there are limits to be set in space. Our behavior changes from one place to another, and we must at least remain consistent with our values; but beyond these behaviors there is a knowledge — that of being itself.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

One must not seek G-d outside ourselves; one must seek Him within ourselves.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We often look for the sacred in a place, a journey, a landscape. Where have we placed, this year, an “external” G-d, convenient because one can walk away from Him? What would change in our home if we held that the search takes place within?

Each according to his path



PRESENTATION

G-d says He revealed Himself to Avraham, to Yitzchak and to Yaakov. But not in the same way, the Rav stresses: each of the patriarchs received Him according to the value he himself had cultivated.

THE QUESTION

Is there only one right way to serve G-d — and should we measure ourselves against those who serve Him differently?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “There is not only one way of serving.”

I revealed Myself to the patriarchs, to each according to the very value he had cultivated. This means that there is not one single way to serve G-d. Each can serve Him according to his own mission, according to his own voice, according to his own sensibility.

This holds even in fulfilling G-d's laws: each does so in his own way, according to his possibilities, according to his abilities. What each one sought was to achieve the best in the path he had taken.

And this, the Rav adds, is the warmly recommended approach for anyone who wishes to approach the knowledge of being: let him know that this knowledge dwells in his own innermost depths, in his own path, and not in his neighbor's.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

There is no competition in this domain.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In a family, we readily compare: who prays best, who studies most, who is most faithful. What is each one's own path? And what should we stop reproaching those who do not serve as we do?

You never see the fruit in the trunk



PRESENTATION

Moshe asks the reason for the suffering. The answer he receives, according to the Rav, does not concern the reason but the purpose — and it comes through the image of a tree.

THE QUESTION

What changes when we stop asking the reason for a trial and look instead for its purpose?

THE ANSWER

The kelipah, the husk: what surrounds the fruit and protects it.

When one looks at a tree, one does not see its purpose; one does not see its fruit. And yet this tree was planted only for the fruit it will bear; but in its trunk, one cannot see it. First the tree must spread its branches on every side, it must put out its bark. And the more the husks harden and develop, the more the fruit can be nourished without being touched by any germ or disturbed in its existence.

Man is in the image of this tree. The fruit he can bear does not come from constantly asking the reason for each thing, but from seeking the purpose of all things. And there is a purpose, and it passes through a husk.

What allows one to pass through the halo of darkness is the awareness that it has an end, that nothing is gratuitous, that nothing, in the end, disturbs the growth of the fruit.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is black that defines white, night that defines day: it is trials that define the light.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We almost always ask “why is this happening to me,” almost never “where is this leading.” Let each person take the hardest trial of his year and ask it the other question.

Why specify that they are “the fathers”?



PRESENTATION

The text says: I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchak and to Yaakov. Rashi notes that it means “the fathers.” If their names are given, what does this title of fathers add?

THE QUESTION

What does a father do that no other man does, which explains why G-d recalls this title?

THE ANSWER

Rashi on Shemot 6:3: “I appeared — to the fathers.”

A father who devotes himself to his child never asks himself what possessed him to bring him into the world. He does not do it in order to exploit his strength one day or to secure a return. He knows that he is exposing himself to many trials: bringing a child into the world, ensuring his education, seeing him through — this is not easy. Most of the time one stops halfway. But one is sure there is continuity.

That is exactly what the patriarchs did. They had been promised wonders, and they enjoyed none of them. What satisfaction did Avraham have? Yitzchak? Yaakov likewise. They took on the burden of parenthood on the strength of promises.

Hence the first teaching: Israel must always look back — not at what is happening to it now, but at how its fathers behaved. And here, at last, comes the realization of what the fathers invested.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

This child is the father's project, and the father is ready to make every sacrifice for his child.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Being a parent means accepting not to be repaid. What have we undertaken this year whose result we will not see? Let each person say what he would like his grandchildren to receive from him, without their knowing where it comes from.

Freedom first



PRESENTATION

What is realized at the Exodus from Egypt, says the Rav, is not first of all religious in nature. The verbs of redemption, recalled by the four cups of the Seder, describe a liberation in stages — even before the Torah, the land and the Temple.

THE QUESTION

Why must freedom come before the Torah — and from what exactly must one be freed?

THE ANSWER

“I will bring you out from under the burdens of Egypt, I will deliver you from their bondage, I will redeem you... I will take you to Me as a people” (Shemot 6:6-7).

The Exodus from Egypt first brings the world the notion of freedom: allowing man to take on his own responsibilities in full independence, and to fight for this freedom so that all humanity may benefit from it. One must first attain it; then will come the Torah, the land, the Temple — all of that will come once this stage is passed.

And this liberation unfolds in four stages, those of the four cups we drink on the night of the Haggadah. I will tear you away from the labors of Egypt; I will deliver you from their subjugation — that is, from their intellectual and moral hold over you.

And when I have torn Egypt out of you — your subjugation to this Egypt, physical as well as intellectual and moral — then I will adopt you as a people.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

As long as a nation has not opted for this freedom, our own will remain threatened.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

One can have left Egypt physically and remain there in thought or in habits. From what hold — a screen, a fashion, the gaze of others — does each of us still need to free himself? And which of the four cups do we still have to drink?

A gift is earned, an inheritance is not



PRESENTATION

After the four expressions of redemption comes a fifth word, debated like the fifth cup: “I will give it to you as a heritage (morashah).” The word is surprising: is the land not, like the Torah, a gift?

THE QUESTION

Why is the land promised as an inheritance, when the Torah is celebrated as a gift?

THE ANSWER

“I will give it to you as a heritage” (Shemot 6:8); “The Torah that Moshe commanded us is the heritage of the congregation of Yaakov” (Devarim 33:4).

One objects: a promise stretched out over time is not enough; we were driven from the land; the land is acquired only conditionally. Some then read morashah as me'orasah, betrothed: the love of betrothal is even more intense than that of marriage, because it is waiting — provided it continues once the union is consummated.

And we bless the One who gave us the Torah, not the One who made us inherit it. A gift is given only to someone one appreciates, whom one cherishes; when we have misgivings about the chosen friend, we stop giving him gifts. An inheritance, on the other hand, need not be earned: the child inherits from his parents, deserving or not, unless they have disinherited him.

Now it happens that we are not at the level of being G-d's partner, that we do not deserve what He has given us. Then we claim the title of heir, this trust received through filiation. The term morashah appears only twice in the Torah: for the Torah, and for the land of Israel.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It will belong to you whether you are there or not, because I have decided to give it to you.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We live largely on an inheritance we did not earn. When have we spoken of Judaism as an acquired possession rather than a trust to be made fruitful? What would it take to be worthy of a gift as well?

SUBJECT 09

The fifth cup: knowing one is not alone



PRESENTATION

Another opinion matches the fifth cup not with the land, but with the knowledge of G-d: this uncertain knowledge, which we cannot quite grasp and which becomes problematic in difficult times. Moshe himself had asked to know G-d's ways.

THE QUESTION

How does one hold on when one cannot fathom the purpose of what one is living through?

THE ANSWER

Moshe: “Make Your ways known to me” (Shemot 33:13).

One cannot always fathom the purpose of each thing. But there is something other than an answer: knowing that I am in communication with someone in what I aspire to, in what I want. That is enough for me to know, even in the worst of prisons, that one day or another I will get out.

Our Sages compared it to a prisoner serving his sentence with the awareness that one day he will be freed. For he knows that others are waging the same struggle as he is, inwardly, without having expressed it — and that one day or another he will find them again.

The Rav specifies that this is not about penalties for offenses committed, but about what pertains to intention — and he immediately gives an example drawn from the law.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

He will be freed, because there are others waging the same struggle as he is.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In a difficult period, what helps is not always an explanation, but knowing that someone is waging the same struggle. Who around us is fighting in silence and would need to hear it? Let each person name someone to tell this week.

SUBJECT 10

A sin on the way to a mitzvah



PRESENTATION

To illustrate what pertains to intention, the Rav cites a case from the Gemara: a man must circumcise two children, one on Shabbat, the other on Sunday. By mistake, he circumcises on Shabbat the one whose day was Sunday.

THE QUESTION

Is a sin committed while trying to fulfill a mitzvah still a sin?

THE ANSWER

Talmud, Shabbat 137a: the two children to be circumcised; “Great is teshuvah, through which deliberate sins become merits” (Yoma 86b).

Must the one who desecrated Shabbat to circumcise the Sunday child bring an atonement offering? According to the opinion the Rav adopts, since the primary intention was not to transgress the law, the act is not considered a transgression: it is part of the fulfillment of the mitzvah — as if, in order to fulfill it, one had passed through an involuntary transgression.

This happens in life, say our Sages. On our way toward truth, toward repentance, our intention is pure; but dark forces within us have led us astray, and we did not act consciously. This deviation along the way is then considered part of the purpose we were seeking.

That is why, in teshuvah, even intentional sins can become merits.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is the purpose that validates the whole.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each of us has taken detours while trying to do good. Which one, in hindsight, turns out to be part of the path? And to whom should we acknowledge that his mistake came from a good intention?

SUBJECT 11

Why does the labor grow heavier as soon as freedom is mentioned?



PRESENTATION

As soon as Moshe spoke of liberation, Pharaoh made the labor heavier and accused the people of laziness. The people, who had believed, no longer listens to Moshe, “out of shortness of spirit and because of hard labor.”

THE QUESTION

Why does oppression redouble at the very moment the idea of freedom begins to take hold?

THE ANSWER

“You are slack, slack!” (Shemot 5:17); “The L-rd is the righteous one, and I and my people are the guilty ones” (Shemot 9:27).

If Pharaoh reacts, it is not because he underestimates Moshe: it is because he has understood. The trust the people has just placed in Moshe means that the idea, in its embryonic state, has already won hearts; from now on it can only ripen little by little. Hence the reproach: you have become slack — that is, you are already ripening this idea of freedom in your innermost depths.

At that moment the opposing forces increase their pressure to force us to forget the idea springing up within us: this movement of repentance, of liberation of our moral conscience, this will to attain the knowledge of G-d. If one pursues it nonetheless, one will see that within the hardening husk, the fruit can ripen soundly.

It is in the hardening of these conditions that Pharaoh himself will end up saying: the L-rd is the righteous one, I and my people are the guilty ones. And this recognition, like the movement of liberation, we must share with everyone. But it does not happen overnight.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It was a flash for him, but he said it.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We often abandon a decision at the very moment resistance appears, and we call it a sign. What did we drop this year because it became harder just after we had started? And what if the difficulty proved that the idea had taken hold?

SUBJECT 12

Why Aharon, and why this list of families?



PRESENTATION

Moshe cannot find his words: he needs a spokesman. And just there the story stops to give a genealogy — but not that of the twelve tribes: it begins, then stops at Levi.

THE QUESTION

Why does the liberator need Aharon, and why does a list of families slip into the heart of the story?

THE ANSWER

“I am of uncircumcised lips” (Shemot 6:12); “These are the heads of their fathers' houses” (Shemot 6:14); Aharon, “who loves peace and pursues peace” (Pirkei Avot 1:12).

Moshe stammered; he could not find the words. Yet everything is done through the Word: if the person you are speaking to does not understand you, he will reject your teaching wholesale. So Aharon was needed, who had the ability to come down to the people's level and speak to them.

And the list? If a genealogy were wanted, the twelve heads of tribes should have been given. Yet it stops at Levi, to say that what is happening in Egypt continues the story of the twelve tribes, of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov: it is neither a rupture nor a break; it is the continuation.

But look who comes out of it. The kingship of Yehudah with Elisheva and Nachshon, who will leap into the water to open a path for the people; the sons of Korach, who will rebel against Moshe; Nadav and Avihu, who will bring a strange fire; Elazar, who will marry a daughter of Yitro; Pinchas, the man of extremes. All are part of the people. That is why the spokesman is Aharon, who loves peace, pursues it and draws people close to the Torah.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The liberation from Egypt is the liberation not only of all the components of the Jewish people, but also of all the components of humanity.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Every family has its Korach, its Pinchas, someone we would gladly have left in Egypt. Whom have we excluded from our table or our esteem? And which of us has Aharon's temperament to go and speak to him?