

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

VAYEHI

12 Questions for the Shabbat Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Vayechi: The Instrument of the Family”: why, since Adam, no
one manages to speak to anyone, how a birthright can be
conceded, and why this parasha has no blank space. Leading up to
the Shema that the sons of Yaakov recite at their father's bedside.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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

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SUBJECT 01

Since Adam, no one speaks to anyone



PRESENTATION

The book of Bereshit is drawing to a close, the family of Israel is formed, and the history of the people can begin with Shemot. But rereading everything since Adam, the Rav observes that in every generation the same thing was missing: dialogue.

THE QUESTION

What do people talk about when they share no common project — and why can silence lead as far as violence?

THE ANSWER

“Kayin spoke to Hevel his brother...” (Bereshit 4:8); “The whole earth had one language and uniform words” (Bereshit 11:1).

Adam holds no dialogue with his wife. They no doubt speak of the contingencies of daily life, indispensable but elementary; beyond that there is no ideal, no life project, and so no discussion arises between them. They remain in their state of original nakedness.

Kayin tries to open a dialogue with his brother, but Hevel considers it impossible: he keeps silent, and Kayin kills him. Lemekh speaks to his two wives, but to justify himself over a death: they do not answer. Noah considers that he owes his generation no account; the salvation granted to him is enough for him.

The generation of the dispersion does have an ideal, a project. But it is that of a single, imposed way of thinking: everyone must think the same thing and follow the same direction. Failure.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

As long as the family is not properly formed, it is impossible to make history.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

With whom, in our home, do we now exchange nothing but practicalities: schedules, shopping, bills? What common project could nourish a real conversation? And when we keep silent, is it out of wisdom, or because we consider dialogue impossible?

SUBJECT 02

The warmth that was missing



PRESENTATION

With the patriarchs, speech resumes, but it still stumbles. Avraham and Lot part ways, Yitzchak and Yishmael do not speak, Esav and Yaakov end in rejection. Then comes the closest failure: Yosef and his brothers, within one and the same family.

THE QUESTION

What is missing in a family whose members can no longer speak to one another — and who can restore the bond?

THE ANSWER

“They could not speak to him peaceably” (Bereshit 37:4).

Everyone counted on Avraham to restore speech. He tries with Lot, but he has to part from him: their paths do not meet. Yitzchak and Yishmael do not speak; Yishmael simply hates his brother. Esav and Yaakov begin a dialogue, but a self-interested one, and the exchange turns to violence, as if it were taking up that of Kayin and Hevel again.

With Yosef and his brothers, they cannot manage to speak to each other within one and the same family. This is where one must speak of warmth, says the Rav. Without it, one no longer even wants to bring children into the world.

And it is precisely Yosef, the brother disowned by his brothers, who will succeed in restoring a dialogue between brothers, and in recovering the unifying discourse of the patriarchs.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

As long as there is no warmth in the family unit, how do you expect to go on?

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

It is not always the best-loved who repairs a family; sometimes it is the one who was kept at a distance. Who in our home could recreate the bond today? And what, concretely, warms our house?

SUBJECT 03

When the son becomes a brother



PRESENTATION

Once speech has been restored, another obstacle remains: the birthright. Since Kayin and Hevel it has been the object of discord, between Yishmael and Yitzchak, between Esav and Yaakov. Yaakov, taught by all his experience, wants engenderings that do not tear the family apart.

THE QUESTION

How can an eldest son accept no longer being “the” son, and what does Reuven do with his right?

THE ANSWER

“She named him Reuven” — “see, a son” (Bereshit 29:32).

The eldest is imposed by nature. He is the only son, the cherished son; when the second child appears, he is no longer the ben, the son: he becomes the ach, the brother, and he dislikes this situation. So there will always, in fact, be a tension between the elder and the younger.

Leah does not say “see my son,” but Reuven: see a son, a model of a son. In what way? What mattered most to Leah was to have a child by Yaakov; and she marks the difference between her son and the son of her father-in-law, Esav: here there will be no discord.

Not only does Reuven not claim his birthright, he concedes it to Yosef — and it is he who will try to rescue him from the pit into which his brothers threw him.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

He does not claim the birthright. He concedes it; he is ready to concede it.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Who in our home holds a place simply by being born first? What did the eldest feel when the second arrived? And what have we received without effort that we could concede to a brother or a sister?

An eldest for whom a brother is already requested



PRESENTATION

In Yaakov's house there is not one firstborn but four: Reuven, son of Leah; Dan, son of Bilhah; Gad, son of Zilpah; and Yosef, Rachel's first son. Two of these birthrights will not be retained, and Yosef's will not give him kingship.

THE QUESTION

Why are some birthrights not retained, and what does Yosef's very name say?

THE ANSWER

“Elokim has taken away my disgrace... May the L-rd add to me another son” (Bereshit 30:23-24).

Rachel gives her maidservant Bilhah to Yaakov for the sole purpose of having children herself — what we would today call a surrogate mother. It is only a passageway, a bridge: this birthright will not be considered. Likewise for Zilpah: Leah already had four sons, which was amply sufficient; she was only seeking something extra, and this birthright will not be retained either.

Then comes Rachel. She thanks G-d for putting an end to her humiliation, her shame. One might have expected her to name the child after this erased shame. She names him Yosef: may He add to me another son. Here is an eldest for whom a younger brother is requested at once — it will be Binyamin.

Yosef will indeed be recognized as firstborn. But because he drew his brothers' animosity upon himself, kingship will not be granted to him: it will go to Yehudah.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Here, then, is an eldest for whom a Binyamin is requested.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Yosef's name is a prayer for someone other than himself. For whom in the family have we prayed as much as for ourselves? And what place have we lost — not for lack of a right, but for not having known how to live with our brothers?

Crossed arms



PRESENTATION

Yaakov blesses the sons of Yosef with crossed arms: his right hand on Ephraim, the younger, his left hand on Menashe, the elder. And it is this very blessing that we still give our children.

THE QUESTION

Why does the blessing we give our children perpetuate a younger son placed before his elder?

THE ANSWER

“Israel stretched out his right hand and placed it on the head of Ephraim, who was the younger... he crossed his hands” (Bereshit 48:14); “May G-d make you like Ephraim and like Menashe” (Bereshit 48:20).

It is with the sons of Yosef, says the Rav, that the concession of the birthright is truly achieved. Yaakov gives preference to Ephraim, who had devoted all his time to studying with his grandfather, while Menashe was his father's right hand in managing the affairs of Egypt.

And that is how the blessing of children was instituted: may G-d make you like Ephraim and like Menashe. From then on, the birthright becomes a material compensation, if you like — nothing more.

The spiritual leadership of the family does not automatically fall to the one born first: it falls to the one who deserves it.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

In no case could the eldest claim a spiritual hold over the leadership of the family, unless he truly deserves it.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

On Friday night, we bless our sons in the name of two brothers in which the younger goes before the elder. What do we want to pass on to them through these words? And in our family, who guides because he is the eldest, and who because he deserves it?

“He will see you and rejoice”



PRESENTATION

Yaakov knew serenity for only seventeen years; his life was struggle and suffering — Dinah lost, Yosef separated from him for so long. Some commentators conclude that it would be better not to venture into founding a large family. The book of Shemot tells a different story.

THE QUESTION

Where does the resistance in Egypt begin, and how does the story of the birthright end?

THE ANSWER

“Send by the hand of whom You will send” (Shemot 4:13); “He will see you and rejoice in his heart” (Shemot 4:14).

The resistance in Egypt begins with children demanding births. Faced with Pharaoh's restrictions, families were separating and no longer wanted children. Miriam went and told her parents: by ending all married life, you are helping Pharaoh do away with the Jewish people. Amram took Yocheved back, and Moshe was born, while Aharon, the eldest, and Miriam were already there.

Aharon led the family's affairs throughout Moshe's exile. When G-d entrusts Moshe with his mission, he refuses it: send the one who has been Your emissary until now — Aharon, my older brother; this charge belongs to him. G-d reassures him: go, he will not take offense.

Not only will Aharon accept that his younger brother be the leader — he will rejoice in it.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

To rejoice in this birthright conceded and recognized to one's younger brother — that was indeed the project of the history of the patriarchs' family.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We know how to congratulate; we are less good at rejoicing. Let each person name a relative's success that it cost him to applaud. And which child in our home has already reminded the adults of what truly matters?

SUBJECT 07

The parashah without a blank



PRESENTATION

Between two parashiyot, the scribe always leaves a blank space of nine letters. Between Vayigash and Vayehi, this blank does not exist: the two are joined, as if one could not be written without the other.

THE QUESTION

What is the blank space for that surrounds the letters and separates two parashiyot — and why nine letters?

THE ANSWER

Rashi on Bereshit 47:28: “Why is this parasha entirely closed?”

Each letter has four resonances: the letter itself; the chant that accompanies it; the meaning given to it by the crowns drawn at its top; and the blank space surrounding it. Every letter is autonomous: if it touches another, the Sefer Torah is not valid, and it must be set aside until the letters are separated. This blank is the unspoken part of each letter, something beyond what I can express myself.

Why nine? Because everything is counted by ten: ten stages of creation, ten commandments, ten plagues, ten stages of a thought. It arrives in a raw state, through an illumination from outside; it passes through binah, analysis; it returns to tiferet, synthesis; one must check whether it is fleeting or whether it will endure; finally one needs the art of expressing it, the poetry that will make it a yesod, a foundation. The tenth element is always the project for the future, which sets a new cycle in motion.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

You have finished a parasha? Now try to integrate it, to live it, to give it a place in your life.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We go from reading to reading, class to class, news item to news item, without leaving any blank. Which idea heard this week deserves to be given room? And what blank — a pause, a silence — is missing from our conversations?

SUBJECT 08

Sleep, the blank space of our life



PRESENTATION

If every parasha is followed by a blank space to let the thought mature, our life has one too. The Rav names it: sleep. And he draws from it a recommendation for Shabbat.

THE QUESTION

Is rest time lost for study, or the moment when study matures?

THE ANSWER

The Shabbat nap, and the Arizal, who received revelations during it.

Sleep is that blank space in our life. When we have studied, and we close our eyes and let our ideas rest, they are not entirely at rest: that is when they settle into place and mature in our mind.

And what we acquire through this rest is sometimes worth more than what we studied during the day, which always remains somewhat confused in our mind.

That is why the Shabbat nap is recommended. The Arizal said that during his Shabbat sleep he reached revelations he did not have during the whole rest of the week: it is a cyclical regeneration of all of one's thought.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Sleep regenerates a person's thought.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We sometimes make decisions without granting them a single night. Which one should we have let rest? And what do we make of the rest of Shabbat: empty time, or the time when what we lived through during the week finds its place?

Seventeen years of fulfillment — in Egypt



PRESENTATION

Yaakov lives seventeen years in the land of Egypt. His whole life had been nothing but struggle and suffering; it is in exile that he finally knows serenity. And it is in exile, too, that his family is complete for the first time.

THE QUESTION

Why does the family of Israel manage to fulfill itself completely only in Egypt, and not in the promised land?

THE ANSWER

“Israel settled in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen” (Bereshit 47:27); “And Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years” (Bereshit 47:28).

Seventeen is a good number: it is the numerical value of *tov*, good. Yaakov lives this fulfillment in Egypt, and it is there that the family is perfectly composed. Later, it is in Egypt that the people will forge its identity; and it is at Purim, again in exile, that it will freely embrace the Oral Law.

Why not in the land of Israel? Because the people of Israel cannot fulfill itself, physically and spiritually, without the universal dimension of the others. Vayechi is therefore quite naturally the continuation of the last verse: Israel settled in the land of Goshen. Goshen was the Jewish quarter of the time — and it is not enough for them: they need to spread out, to put down roots.

And the text changes name. Israel is the spiritual dimension; Yaakov, the physical reality. In exile we become Yaakov again: the newborn holding Esav's heel, preventing him from going further, or walking in his wake so as not to lose him.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

In the land of exile we are Yaakov; at home we are Israel. Then the identity is whole.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Where did we mature the most: where we were at ease, or where we were strangers? And in our everyday life, when are we Yaakov, clinging to the heel of others, and when are we Israel?

SUBJECT 10

Eyes and heart closed



PRESENTATION

Rashi asks why this parasha is closed, without a blank space. First answer: because at Yaakov's death, the eyes and the heart of Israel were closed, through the anguish of servitude.

THE QUESTION

The Egyptians enslaved the people only after Yosef's death. Why date the blindness from Yaakov's death?

THE ANSWER

Rashi on Bereshit 47:28: “When Yaakov our father died, the eyes and the heart of Israel were closed.”

The eye is what analyzes and distinguishes; the heart, what feels, the regesh. These are the two ways of grasping an event, and both were closed. They did not see the consequences of what seemed to them good fortune: how pleasant life is in Egypt, getting along with other cultures, living in harmony with others. Living conditions were not bad.

Yet they had the possibility, in Yaakov's lifetime, of saying: our family is formed, we can return to the promised land. There is therefore here a condemnation of this deliberately prolonged stay.

Yaakov himself did not want even a temporary burial in Egypt. He makes Yosef swear to carry his body away immediately, whereas Yosef will only ask that his own be taken on the day of liberation. Yaakov had gone down only at G-d's command: “I will go down with you, and I will also bring you up.” His children should have understood.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

They did not look beyond what lay ahead of them in the long run.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

One never settles into an exile: one simply feels at home there. What in our home has become so comfortable that we no longer look where it is leading? And who in the family still sees with the eye when all the others judge with the heart?

SUBJECT 11

What Yaakov could not say



PRESENTATION

Rashi gives a second explanation: Yaakov wanted to reveal to his sons the end of days, the ketz, and it was hidden from him. His prophetic power left him at the very moment he was about to speak.

THE QUESTION

Why is a dying father prevented from telling his children what he knows of their future?

THE ANSWER

“Gather together, and I will tell you what will befall you at the end of days” (Bereshit 49:1); Rashi on Bereshit 47:28.

Yaakov wanted to comfort his children and, through them, his descendants. He knew the covenant made with Avraham: the people would dwell in Egypt in harsh conditions before forging its identity there and coming out with a thirst for freedom. And the first message to carry to the world is freedom of action and the committed responsibility of each person.

Now the Kohen wore on his breastplate the names of the twelve tribes, to associate them all with his service. The Rav points out that four letters are missing from these names: kuf and tzadi, which form ketz, the end; chet and tet, which form chet, sin — a chet open only at the bottom, like a break.

So Yaakov wondered: if I am prevented from revealing the ketz, does something remain unresolved among my children? This shalom may be only a way of not making me suffer; it has not yet proven itself, since the father is not yet gone.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

True brotherhood is put to the test when the father is already gone.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We sometimes believe peace reigns, when in fact no one wants to grieve the one who is about to leave. What will our family look like the day there is no one left to spare? And what can we settle starting today?

SUBJECT 12

The answer given at the bedside



PRESENTATION

The sons of Yaakov, gathered around his bed, sense his worry. They answer him by reciting the Shema, the profession of faith. And the gesture that accompanies it, to this day, is to close one's eyes.

THE QUESTION

What exactly do the sons of Yaakov answer their father — and why must one close one's eyes to say it?

THE ANSWER

“Hear, O Israel: the L-rd is our G-d, the L-rd is One” — said by the sons of Yaakov at their father's bedside (Pesachim 56a).

They tell him: just as you have complete faith in the One who is One, who unites heaven and earth, who is the origin of creation and the master of all creatures, know that we too are united by this same faith.

And when we recite this faith, the immediate gesture is to close our eyes. For it is something beyond: not something we are going to reason out, that would obey some kind of logic. This faith is present within us; when it is put to the test, it will assert itself.

From this comes a piece of advice: recite the Shema in community. One stops, one waits for everyone to reach this part of the prayer; and even if not everyone is at the same place, as soon as the others recite it, we must join in their profession of faith. It is the mark of our belonging to this same faith.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We are at once the children of Yaakov and of Israel.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Unity is not proven by a speech: it is proven by stopping to wait for others. Whom have we left behind because he was not going at our pace? And what conviction could we say together, tonight, at this table?